緋弾のアリアXI
絶対半径(キリングレンジ)2051
Aria the Scarlet Ammo
赤松中学
MF文庫J

Novel Illustrations

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メディアファクトリー

緋弾のアリアVI　絶対半径2051

東京武偵高校、そこは武力を行使する探偵――通称「武偵」を育成する特殊な学校。強襲科の超エリートでSランクの最強武偵・アリアのパートナーに選ばれてしまった（普段は）ただの一般人・遠山キンジに、Sランクの天才狙撃手・レキが勝負を挑んできた。圧倒的な力の差を見せつけてキンジを打ち負かしたレキは、キンジと一緒に暮らすことを強引に決めてしまう。一方、パートナーを取られたアリアとキンジの間には壁が生じてしまい……。そしてチーム編成を決めるための「修学旅行」が始まる。はたしてレキの真意は――!?　大スケールアクション＆ラブコメディー第6弾!!

緋弾のアリアVI

Aria the Scarlet Ammo

絶対半径（キリングレンジ）2051

赤松中学

P11 1弾 人間狩り（スナイプ）

P60 2弾 水投げ

P120 3弾 修学旅行I（キャラバン・ワン）

P190 4弾 閃光弾・音響弾（フラッシュ・カノン）

P250 Go For The NEXT! 蕾姫

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絶対半径（キリングレンジ）2051

赤松中学

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6巻発売とほぼ同時に
コミック版アリア1巻発売ですよ！
こよか先生の描かれるかわいらしいアリアに
キーキー言われたい。

そしてアリアアニメ化だそうで
おめでとうございます！！

DVDレコーダー買っておいて
良かった、(´▽`)ノ
正座してテレビ前で待機しようと
思います！

さて6巻ですがレキの可愛い面大爆発なので、
挿絵でも可愛く見えるよう
気合い入れました。

しかしアリアが少なくて寂しかったので
7巻ではアリアが活躍してくれると
いいなあ。

1st Ammo: Manhunt

--The Dragunov Sniper Rifle

A slender body design, with a great aesthetic design.

It is very light, and it far surpasses other sniper rifles.

Also, its durability and reliability are not bad, and it is one of the world-class sniper rifles.

"Wa, wait. Wait a moment."

The Dragunov sniper rifle is entirely different than the sniper rifles which only have shooting as an advantage.

In a hostile environment it won't receive damage, it can continuously shoot through the semi-automatic function, and also, attached to the muzzle, there's a bayonet, making it usable as a pike……it's a terrifying 'warzone' sniper rifle.

"Why are you unhappy……Reki!"

That muzzle, for now, was pointing directly at me.

The one holding the rifle was the Snipe division's genius, Reki.

She is someone who has the potential of a genius, the S-ranked butei in the same grade as me.

"——You and Aria, cannot be together."

Her voice completely toneless, Reki replied the same way as before.

Behind her, there was a bit of Tokyo's chilly night view, with tonight's moonlight blooming with radiance.

I was stirred up by the sight of that scene with a feeling of uneasiness……

"United.....is what?"

After she spoke those weird words, I was slightly blushing.

Just then, Aria and me——

After cleaning the Inquesta building, we were on this roof. Under the sunset. Just two of us.

Looking like this, maybe it looked like a scene of a pair of intimate man and woman who loves each other.

But, why did Reki, who seemed to have seen us two do that kind of thing, draw her gun!?

"Don't.....don't say rubbish. The relationship between Aria and me isn't that kind. It should be just the opposite, just then we were saying.....that, from now on.....we will be separated. Us two."

"Were you talking about breaking up?"

"What, what do you mean by 'breaking up'?"

"If it's like this, then it is even better. Because Kinji-san, can be my husband without being bothered."

That, that point.

Only that point.

The weirdest thing would be that point.

After chasing Aria away from here, Reki is now pointing her rifle at me.....

(And actually, proposed to me!)

"Reki, you, why are you talking about 'marriage'.....!"

Also, from the beginning, I have the disease that is called Hysteria Mode in my body. I must live far away from women.

That you, actually say 'marriage'. What the heck is that!

"——If it's like this, Kinji-san can become 'Ulus'."

"Ulus……?"

"It means 'family'" (T/L note: Ulus is in Mongolian.)

Family……family member?

Impossible. This is becoming harder and harder to understand.

I'm just about to cry.

"Well, that...after marriage, the man and woman become family. ……But I already have my brother, it's more than enough for me. If you want to have someone you can call family, you can find some other person to take care of you. What do you think?"

I said that, trying to evade it.

" 'The wind says, that it's you' "

Reki, said that with her previous hard tone.

" 'The wind says, that it can only be you' "

——That tone, seemed to have an inexplicably strong confidence.

Her pupils, which looked like lenses, were glaring at me as if she wanted to pierce through me with that gaze.

It is really transparent, the sniper rifle's scope.

(……What the heck is that……!)

This Reki, is different from the usual Reki.

This girl's nickname is 'Robot Reki'. She's always a wordless, emotionless, expressionless girl. But despite that, the Reki as of now is making me feel some inexplicable intensity, as if I'm her target.

——As if, she has received some kind of order.

"Lis-listen to me. Reki."

I wanted to move my body out of her line of fire, stepping back a bit as if it was nothing.

"Your actions are far too contradictory. Since you want me to be part of the family, why are you pointing your gun at me? Put that down, and let's talk about this calmly. Alright?"

"Denied. Men and women should not talk to each other--"

And doing the opposite of my suggestion, Reki shifted the gun with the slightest movement possible, pointing it at me while saying:

"--but steal each other."

Men and women should steal each other.

So, that's how Reki views boy-girl relationships. Well, if one had to talk about whether it was right or not, one couldn't say that it's completely wrong.

But, isn't that a *really* wrong way of looking at things?

I berated Reki in my heart, and in my line of sight...

Whoosh

A leaf-brown cloth rode the wind, fluttering down.

Fluttering precisely within my reach, it was the jacket that I had taken off earlier so I could clean.

I looked up at the direction that it had flown from--and there, standing on the air-conditioning unit precisely one level above the ground, a beast was looking down at me.

That jacket appeared to be something that it had carried in its mouth all the way from the Inquesta classroom.

(Haimaki...!)

That was the silver-white wolf that Reki was taking care of, Haimaki.

Not understanding why he would be holding my uniform...

I caught it, and a little agitated, I put my hands through its sleeves.

Butei High's uniform--The jacket and pants are made out of the bulletproof fiber, TNK.

It's useless against the armor-piercing rounds that Reki was holding earlier, but wearing it is a little reassuring.

After all, the bullets that are stored in that magazine may not all be pierce rounds.

"Kinji-san."

"...What?"

"I too, do not wish to immediately make Kinji-san marry me."

Naturally.

"As such--I think that I will give you seven minutes grace."

Just seven!?

"From now on, I will attack you seven times. If you are able to escape being hit for more than one minute, I will retract my proposal."

This is like...explaining the rules of a game.

A cold sweat breaking out, I looked down at my watch.

"You can run where-ever you like. But, I'll warn you first. My 'Killing Range' is 2051 meters."

--Killing range.

The farthest range at which a hit is a certainty...The people in Snipe have different names for it, but Butei call it "Killing Range".

Which is to say, that is the distance at which snipers will definitely take out the enemy--

"In short, no matter where you run to inside this 2051 meter radius, my rifle will be able to hit you. Because, this rifle will never betray me--"

Kch Looking at Reki, who had straightened her gun again, at last...

I too, strengthened my resolve.

--I get it, I get it.

It looks like no matter what, you're not willing to talk with me, Reki.

Then, as you wish, I will play this game with you.

The normal me would definitely be unwilling to listen to these words.

I don't know when Reki figured out how to make me change...But the me as of now has entered Hysteria Mode, where I will listen to anything that girls say, because...

Without heat or passion, but all the more stimulating because of it--Earlier, Reki's kiss.

"Then, please marry me before the seventh bullet."

But...Why 'seven'?

I didn't have enough time to even voice that question--

Thud!

"!?"

Leaping off the air-conditioning unit, the silver-wolf Haimaki flew over my head!

I saw that--probably something that Reki had made him wear--on his back, thick metal plating, just like armor, was protecting it. This is...I no longer have the chance to use the paralyzing bullet

technique to graze his back, like I did to his brother.

"--Uu!"

I, standing at the edge of the Inquesta Building, where the emergency stairs were, was smashed into by Haimaki, pouncing through the air.

Colliding with me like that, I fell onto the rusty steps.

As if pulling out its prey's organs, Haimaki ripped my cellphone out of my pocket, and just as that happened--

Chnk!

--The Dragunov's gunshot!

(Armor-piercing bullet--!)

I was in Hysteria Mode, but the blood froze in my veins.

I thought I was hit...but there was no pain. I was not injured.

As I felt a wave of relief wash over me, *Gchhng!*

"!"

Lumped together like a Dango, Haimaki and I tumbled over together. We struck the handrail of the stairs, breaking it, sending us falling into thin-air.

Don!

Haimaki jumped off me, using me as a step, returning to the stairs.

Quickly deploying the cable in my belt, I, like the Spiderman in the movies, lowered myself down to the emergency stairs a few floors below.

"...?"

Feeling a strange sensation, I glanced towards my left wrist, and my bulletproof uniform--

One of the buttons on the cuff was missing.

I could understand from the tiny piece of broken metal that was left on the sleeve. Just before, Reki had shot it off. The button.

Reki...Hasn't changed. She's still as impressive as usual.

As I was rolling around with Haimaki, she managed to shoot such that she only hit the tiny button of my cuffs.

(But, why did she shoot that kind of thing...?)

As I frowned, by my ear, *Kccccchhhhh*--

As its paws trod upon the steel stairs, I heard the sound of its footsteps fast approaching.

Haimaki was rushing down the stairs.

I stretched out the Beretta in my hand...before I stopped.

Haimaki's bulletproof armor. That should be the tactical body armor that police dogs or Butei dogs wear.

My 9mm bullet would be completely useless. Even if I used all my bullets, the best I'd be able to do is delay him.

With no other choice, I could only spin around, rushing down the stairs, just ahead of Haimaki.

--Haimaki.

Now that I think about it, I had spent some time chasing you around on a motorcycle in the middle of spring. That's when you were still under Vlad's control. But now...it's your turn to chase me. This is divine retribution, isn't it?

Having landed on the ground, I--

(If another bullet comes, I'll defend using Billiard Shot--)

-thought that for a moment, before I realized that It was impossible.

A prerequisite of Billiard Shot is the ability to see the stance of the enemy, and deduce the trajectory of the bullet. I have to link the timing of my shot with the timing of her shot, a technique that only has one chance of success.

And facing a sniper whom I can't see, it's impossible for me to predict when she will open fire--I can't use it.

Feeling Haimaki's breath from behind my back, I sprinted forward with all my might, nothing else I could do. Under the strange looks of pedestrians that passed by occasionally, I went under the monorail tracks, jumping the guardrail to enter the commercial district, ignoring the traffic lights--

And using the anti-sniper tactics that I had learned in Assault, I twisted aside at one of the crossroads, entering a tiny alley.

Bullets cannot curve, and as such, sniper rifles can only hit enemies that are directly in their line of fire. As long as I hide in this kind of angular place, I definitely won't be hit.

"Haa, haa, haa..."

I leaned my back against the wall of the building, glancing at my watch.

It's just about to reach one minute after the first shot. According to the rules that Reki set down, this should be my victory.

I thought this, turning my head towards the entrance of the alley to see whether Haimaki had caught up with me--

--*Giin!*

Suddenly, sparks burst forth from the pole of the traffic light by the side of the road.

"!?"

The next instant, *Bch!*, a feeling of numbness ran up my wrist.

(I-I was hit...!?)

I looked to my left wrist in panic--and again, I saw that yet another button on the cuffs of my sleeve had been ripped off by a bullet.

Reki. You--

-hit the pole of the traffic light, and you still managed to make the bullet ricochet and hit my wrist!

L-Snipe.

Like the concept of the V-shape bullet trajectory that my own Billiard Shot draws in the air, this is a sniping technique that allows the bullet to reach an enemy around an angle, a shot that draws an L in the air.

I went "Tch", and I ran deeper into alley, which continued to wind--*Gng! Gng!* The sound of ricocheting bullets resounded twice behind me, and this time, the feeling of numbness ran up my right wrist.

--L-L Snipe...!

The bullet hit the pole of the traffic light before it ricocheted off a roadside garbage-can, chasing me all the way up the street!

(I-is that even possible...!?)

While I continued to go "Tch", I ran through the automatic door of a select shop.

This is in an alley which has two corners, and what's more, this is a shop. Added to this, in front of this shop, there's nothing like a postbox or power-line pole to ricochet off.

(This place is definitely...safe!)

Quite unpopular, this shop was filled with mannequins of girls, but there was not a customer in sight.

--*Zccchh!*

I saw Haimaki, hurtling in front of the store like a hurricane...and the store attendant, seeing him, retreated into a corner of the shop.

Just right. I'm sorry, but I'm just going to hide here for now.

"...?"

Drawing my gun and pointing towards the open door, I--couldn't help but frown.

Haimaki was not entering the store.

He had stopped in front of the automatic door such that it would not close, and he lowered his head, stretching his front paws out, crouching down.

(...!)

I reacted violently, but it was already too late.

Gin!--*Gin!*--the bullet, having come here all the way through the alley, also--*Giiin!*

Ricocheted off the metal plating on Haimaki's back, facing this way--

Bcch! It tore past my right sleeve in a heartbeat.

"--Uwoah!"

My wrist having been grazed by a bullet, I fell towards the feet of the mannequins.

I looked at my hand, sprawled out across the floor--and from my right wrist, one more button had disappeared from the cuffs.

My mind in Hysteria Mode told me what exactly that meant.

If you add the first and second button on the chest of my uniform and the 2 cuff buttons on each of my wrists---together, there are six buttons.

And Reki has been shooting them one by one.

--Reki's words echoed in my mind.

"Then, please marry me before the seventh bullet."

If all six of my buttons go missing, and I still haven't replied with "YES"--

The seventh shot--where are you going to shoot, Reki.

Could it be that, you are trying to kill...me!

"...Fuck...!"

Reki can see me. Reki can shoot me.

But despite that, I cannot see her. I cannot shoot her back.

(This is a sniper...!)

A battle between pistols and snipers is like a battle between a sword and a gun. If both sides are far apart from each other, the pistol's bullet will have no way of reaching the sniper. Even if it's the me in Hysteria Mode, that fact doesn't change.

Kneeling on one knee and looking up, I...in an instant, all the mannequins looked like Reki.

This terrifying feeling. I'm going to go mad. My consciousness was about to be pressured into reaching its limit.

The me as of right now is being run down by a silver wolf, and I am but prey that cannot evade the bullets of the hunter.

Yes...This is as Reki called it, a 'hunt'.

--Isn't this just a...'Manhunt'!!

I used all the bullets in my Beretta to chase Haimaki away, and Hysteria Mode, sending interrupted thoughts into my mind, had thought of a place where I could hide.

I don't know why, but...

The Hysteria Mode this time, triggered by Reki, went away extremely fast.

(If 'the exterior of an obstacle' doesn't work, then if I enter the 'hollow interior of an obstacle'...!)

Perhaps, I might have a chance.

Thinking that way, I ran, throwing my body about, piercing through the alleys, returning to the entrance of the campus. Hopping the fence, I ran into the Logi's garage. Rushing towards what appeared to be a very sturdy four-wheel drive, I used the multi-purpose tool in my Butei Handbook to open the door.

Butei cars are completely armored. Even if the enemy uses armor-piercing bullets, it's still able to withstand the attack.

As long as I hide here, there shouldn't be a problem--

But, as I had just entered and closed the door.

Pa!

"!"

Cracks, running outwards like a spiderweb, appeared on the window of the car. That was Reki's shot!

But, the bullet didn't pierce it. It only damaged the bulletproof glass, ricocheting off.

A-as it should.

(My...victory!)

But, as I rubbed my hands, slick with cold sweat, I froze.

--*Pa!*

--*Pa!*

Pa! Pa! Pa!

The sniping...continued without pause.

And, they were all concentrated on one singular point on the glass, not straying by even a millimeter.

Reki, like hammering a nail into a plank--Finally--

Kch!

Shot through the bulletproof glass!

Bch! And, on my uniform--the second button on my chest was ripped off, spinning into the air.

My mind...thought back to Reki's other words.

"That's why, you should know that there are people who can easily destroy your existences through other means."

She was completely correct. If what Reki was aiming for was not a button...but my head, then even the me in Hysteria Mode would have had my brains blown out.

Jeanne, Vlad, Patra--

Even Sherlock I could beat when I was in this mode--Hysteria Mode!

Fuck! Ahh, I've understood! I understand it very well! You're stronger than me!

So, please stop it! Reki!

On my uniform, only one button was left.

I ran out of the four-wheel vehicle, which already had a broken window, and I used the last resort.

Understanding that running away had no meaning, I no longer ran to extend the distance.

(More like, I'm doing the opposite...!)

Just before Hysteria Mode had disappeared, the last place to run had flashed into the forefront of my mind--my starting point, Inquesta.

The building that Reki was on.

If she's still on that rooftop, then it's impossible for her to shoot downwards. Absolutely.

Even if she rushes down the stairs, preparing to shoot within the classroom, she will definitely take too much time, and I will win.

I sprinted into the building with all my might, running into the classroom that Aria and I had had a competition to clean this evening. I didn't turn on the light.

I glanced at my watch--It had been 50 seconds since the last shot.

10 seconds left. 9, 8, 7...

Alright. At the last of the last, I made a comeback. Thanks to the inverse logic due to the circumstances.

As I heaved a sigh of relief--

"!"

Her hair and skirt fluttering, Reki--

--*Bang*--!

Falling down in what amounted to a standing position, she shot me through the window!

That bullet, fired from point blank range, shattered the glass. And inexorably, it continued towards me, who couldn't help but flinch backwards. Towards the first button on the chest of my uniform.

Kin!

It was blown away...!

(I'm done...!)

Apparently having affixed her cable to the roof, Reki, *Shhh*...used a miniature automated reel to ascend up the cable and entered the classroom through the window. Standing in front of me, who was still in a state of shock.

Afterward, she raised that face, which looked like it belonged to the CG of a game character, drawn with painstaking care...

And like a robot, she raised the Dragunov towards me.

Pointing at the chest of my uniform, which was wide open--pointing it at my completely defenseless, vulnerable, heart.

"--I-I surrender. I understand. Don't fire."

Reki really is a girl whom I cannot understand.

So, she might really kill me with the seventh bullet.

Because before this, when we had fought with Patra, she had shot the opponent in the head as if it were perfectly natural.

"Whether it's marriage or something else, I will agree. Don't fire."

My last thread of hope, Hysteria Mode, having been released, I could only raise my hands in defeat.

And in front of me, who was in this position...

Kch. Reki leaned the Dragunov against a desk by her side.

"--Then, Kinji-san. From now onwards, I am yours. I have translated the following edict into modern Japanese...If you don't understand, then please forgive me."

And with that, taking off her headphones, striding in my front of me--

In the empty nighttime classroom, she knelt.

Behind her...the moon, particularly enormous tonight, scattered its rays through the shattered window.

"From this moment onward, I am for Kinji-san to use. The strength of my gun is yours, use it as you will. My body has become but one of your possessions, use it as you will."

...He-hey...

"A bride does everything her lord wishes. I vow that my bullets will seek vengeance upon all those nearby who wish to harm my lord. I will eradicate them, not leaving a trace."

Wh...What did you say?

Just now, you set your wolf on me, and you shot at me...

But despite that, now, "my body has become but one of your possessions"?

"One of Ulus is all, and all of Ulus is one. From this moment onwards, us 47 girls of Ulus, no matter when, for eternity, will become your strength."

As if reciting certain requirements, she added this last sentence, in front of me, who was still stunned--

Standing up lightly, she wore her headphones again, and she picked up the Dragunov, shouldering it.

"... ..."

She was completely still. She just stood there like that. And that expressionless gaze was fixated upon the empty air in front of her.

This is probably...the normal Reki. I can already feel the lack of killing intent.

I may not know why, but that hunter form she was in just now, appears to have stopped.

"..."

Standing there in a daze, just like Reki, I felt a chill trickle up my spine...Using my mind in normal mode, I organized this sequence of events, which didn't seem to have fully registered in my mind.

Just now, that 'Manhunt' was probably an exhibition of Reki's power.

--If you run, I will kill you.

That message had been deeply engraved into my mind.

And just after that, she announced that she would marry me.

--I am yours.

These 2 messages were completely contradictory, but without a doubt, she had conveyed such to me in reality.

(...)

I scratched my head, trying to ascertain the situation around me.

I've been captured by a sniper. If I run, I will be sniped. The Butei phrase for such situations is, 'Sniper Restriction'.

It conveys the situation of being trapped in the opponent's Killing Range--an invisible cage.

Following the rules that I had learned in Assault about being restricted by an enemy...I should pretend to surrender, not resisting, no matter what may come my way. Submit and obey the opponent's every order.

And, later, take the chance to escape, or call for support.

Well...right now, Reki probably won't interrogate me or kill me like a Yakuza or terrorist. So, the first movement that is laid down--'Surrender', should be the correct step to take.

But, although I waved a white flag--

"..."

-I had no idea of what to do afterward.

Reki seemed to have entered standby, and she didn't move at all.

"..."

I tested the waters, taking one step, two steps back...

Tap Tap

Uu. She followed.

I turned my back, leaving the classroom...*Tap Tap Tap Tap* She

continued to follow, at my back.

...So hateful. This is like the incarnation of a ghost, haunting my back.

Thinking that, I quickened my steps, wanting to descend the stairs--

Appearing to notice this, Reki, *Shh*,

Grabbed my sleeve.

"...What is it."

"Please don't leave me."

"Why?"

"I cannot let the enemy attack you."

The enemy, she says. Who would want to attack me?

Now that I think about it, she said this before she started to attack me. Something like, "the enemies from now on,"

...Wasn't that about you?

But, if I just resist her, things will get ugly, right? If I push Reki's switch, and she becomes weird again, she might just deliver the seventh bullet a little late, directly to my head this time.

"So...what are you going to do, Reki? From now on?"

"I will obey you. I will carry out any orders you give."

"...Get away from me."

"I cannot do such a thing."

What is this. Despite the fact that you just said you will carry out any orders I give.

With that, I looked back, an unsatisfied expression on my face.

"Then...raise one leg."

I copied the old movie that I had seen on TV, 'Terminator 2', and I tried saying something horrible.

And--*Shh*

On top of the stairs, Reki raised her right knee a little, standing there on one leg, just like a flamingo.

Hmmm...well, looks like she really will do anything I say.

...Alright. I've thought of something good.

"A little more up."

This could be my chance to escape.

I--will push Reki. I'll just pretend it's payback for the blow from before.

If she rolls down the stairs like that, I can steal the Dragunov before running away.

Diagonally above me, who had been putting this together in my mind, Reki raised her small, deer-like leg.

But, her center of gravity didn't change at all. That's amazing, that sense of balance feels like that of a gymnast.

Shhh....*Shhhh*...

That snow white knee continued to raise up, continuing to reach towards the ceiling...

And her thigh, nearly horizontal now, brought her skirt along with it...

"...!"

Ah...Hey...

Th-the scene before my eyes is about to get da-dangerous!

"A-alright, alright! You can bring it down now!"

Turning my face around, I gave her an order, panicked.

--*Tap*

Fuah Reki brought her leg down, and her skirt returned to normal.

"?"

Seeing me so panicked, Reki twisted her head by one centimeter.

Hey, is there a need to go "?" If you had raised it more, I'd be able to see under your short skirt. If you're a girl, then be a little more embarrassed, a little more unwilling, alright?

Really--Reki really is a robot girl.

Now, have I been forced to take something I don't want at all, a remote control?

A defective remote control, one with a missing switch: 'Go far away'.

Me.

Reki, behind me.

Haimaki, behind Reki.

We walked through the nighttime street in a row, just like RPG characters...I was thinking.

To be honest, I was extremely, extremely angry. I wanted to return home and sleep as fast as possible.

But, at this time, if I were to bring Reki back to my own room--earlier, having misunderstood the relationship between Reki and I, Aria...Meeting up with her would be very awkward.

And, Shirayuki as well. She said that she was going to stay at the Meiji Shrine tonight...But, my misfortune has been proven again

and again, so with that in mind, I followed the steps in my head: "I will return home before the agreed time!" → "Some pests have attached themselves to Kin-chan! Pests should be exterminated!" With that, there's the possibility that Dormitory War III will break out again.

As for Muto or Shiranui's place...that won't do either. As long as Reki continues to follow me, those places won't do at all.

With no other options, I told Reki this.

But, Reki didn't take it seriously at all, and she said:

"Then come to my room."

And at that moment, I finally noticed...I had already been pressured into a position where I had no choice but to do that.

(The girl's dormitory...how hateful...)

Stealthily, making sure that the teacher on duty didn't notice me, I walked into the 2nd girl's dormitory. Reki and Haimaki's steps were completely silent, but the same couldn't be said for me. Hey, Reki, how is it that you have such a perfect gait? You may have said "come to my room," so calmly, but isn't it obvious that if I'm noticed, things will get ugly?

Continuously complaining in my heart, I arrived at Reki's room...

"..."

Inside, was the same terrifying desolateness, without a trace of life.

The room, illuminated by a single lightbulb, had no furniture at all. Actually, why doesn't the wall even have a clock on it? It's amazing that you're able to live in this kind of sickening atmosphere.

It may have been the second time I had come here, but I still felt a vague feeling that I was intruding.

"... ..."

Now that I think about it, even though it looks like this, this room still belongs to a single girl.

And from now on, I am going to live with Reki here, just a boy and a girl.

This...in terms of Hysteria Mode, is a huge pinch.

Because, if I go into Hysteria Mode, and spend a night with Reki, who has a personality like that of a hostess, doing something that I can't take back...

...I might really have to take responsibility. I might have no choice but to marry her. That really is a deathtrap. Also, the person in question won't resist at all.

(I have to stay alert...)

I couldn't help but twist my gaze away from Reki, who was bending down, removing her shoes on the bare concrete...couldn't help but twist my gaze away from the nape of her neck, slightly exposed...so white that I could hardly tell the difference between her skin and the uniform.

Never having applied any makeup or cosmetics, Reki has never received a lot of attention, but in truth...

She is a breathtakingly beautiful girl.

In truth, her face as it is, is far more beautiful than a model's face, completely covered with makeup.

That expressionless face makes people feel that she is hard to approach...but, just as Reki's secret fanclub believes, she is amazingly cute.

"--Kinji-san."

"Hmm? Ah, um, what?"

Thinking about that, my voice a little agitated, I couldn't help but twist my head around to look at Reki, who had suddenly raised her

head, looking my way.

Th-this expressionless gaze, looking upwards--Damn it, it's cute. It's like the gaze of a puppy.

"The keycard to this place. Please use it as you like."

Reki's slender, white finger...It was hard to believe that just few a moments ago, it had been pulling the trigger to a sniper rifle--passed the ID card to me.

(I don't want it! But, if I say something like that, her sniper rifle will spit fire again, right...)

With no other choice, I reached out, but my fingers...and Reki's soft, gentle fingers.

Shh

For an instant. They touched. As if linking with each other.

--*Dogun*

My heartbeat, a strange sound.

For some reason, this seems to be the sound between 'Dokin' and 'Giku. It's pretty talented. My heart, that is.[1]

"..."

"..."

Ahh...Damn it. I can't speak. Against girls...I am weak. No matter how much time may pass, no matter which girl it may be.

Reki strode into one of the interior rooms from the entrance. Inside, was the only piece of furniture--On the table, were various tools, which looked like metal brushes and anvils. Those tools were used for maintaining guns.

Having been standing in the living room in a daze, I didn't really

want to stay inside the desolate living room...and so, I also walked into the other room, which was like a workroom.

"...Sorry for interrupting."

"..."

Reki didn't look at me. She was sitting up straight on the chair, preparing to maintain her sniper rifle.

Click Click Chck Chck

The gun was dismantled under Reki's practiced movements, turning into a mass of components, laid out piece by piece onto the table.

There was nothing like a manual or handbook by her side.

It appears that each component and function of the Dragunov, down to the smallest screw, was completely memorized by her.

Her technique able to match any Amdo teacher, perfectly maintaining the Dragunov, Reki--

-*Kch*, pointed the reassembled rifle at the wall, checking it.

Almost like a swordsman who had just been given a katana.

"Kinji-san. I'm sorry, but starting now--please stop breathing for a while."

"...Breathing? What?"

"There is a chance that the water particles in your breath might stick to the bullet and affect it, somehow."

Finished talking, Reki pulled open a drawer and took a vinyl-sealed ziploc bag from out of it. From within it, she took out a 7.62×54mmR--a sniper round.

(...Breathing, she says. She really has some mental problems...)

But still, I lowered my breathing, staring at Reki as she worked.

Looking closely, there was a scale on the table. That was an instrument to precisely measure how much gunpowder to use in each bullet.

Which is to say, sealed inside the case that Reki had just taken out, were bullets, all of them made by Reki herself. She certainly pays a lot of attention to fine detail.

As for me, I always go to buy the pistol bullets that are resold by the army. Not even that, I always aim for the cheap ones.

"..."

Wearing gloves, Reki placed one bullet, two bullets on the table, in a neat row.

After she had finished laying them all out, *Shh*, she stared at the 20 bullets, spread apart...

Her eyes, seeming like scanners, gazed upon the bullets, flowing from left to right in a meticulous order, unblinking....

She only picked one bullet up.

Continuing to scan the bullet from every angle, Reki made me feel as if she needed no instruments to measure anything. Rather, with just her eyes and fingertips, she could sense every microgram of fault, feel every nanogram of error.

"..."

Reki slotted the bullet, which appeared to have passed her test, into the magazine, and the remaining 19 bullets...*Clatter Clatter*. She threw them all into the rubbish bin by her feet. Once again, she took out another case, which probably held 20 bullets as well.

"What are you doing?"

"Misfire protection. I will only use the best bullet from the 20."

"...Don't be so wasteful. This is an eco-era, after all. And as for misfires, when they happen, they happen. There's no stopping it."

"Until now, that has not happened to me once."

Apparently having a lot of pride when it comes to matters involving guns, Reki answered me, the box clasped between her hands.

"That...I realize that maintenance is important. But, there will be times where guns, as well as tools, don't respond to our commands. The ability to adapt to such a situation, and overcome it is what it means to be a Butei."

"This gun will not fail me."

Reki returned those words, her tone slightly firmer, slightly louder, those cute lips tightly closed--

Her gaze returned to the desk, and she continued selecting the bullets.

It's true that...if one does such a thing, the probability of a misfire happening will become zero.

(But--this way of doing things, she won't even let one drop fall from her cup.)

With just one battle, she completely dismantles her gun, maintaining it, protecting against any malfunctions.

All her bullets are made meticulously, and even after that, they undergo a strict selection phase to prevent any chance of misfiring.

Reki's attitude, obsessive to this level, leaves no room for error.

It may be that I, not wanting to be killed, decided to surrender first, looking for a chance to run...

But, looking at this scene, her meticulousness is such that, there will be no 'chance to run'.

(At any rate, were I to escape to any corner of Academy Island...as long as I am within two kilometers of Reki, I will be sniped...)

It looks like my plan to run was meaningless.

Since that's the way things are--The only thing I can do is, convince Reki to stop attacking me.

But, how do I do that?

I leaned against the wall, my mind whirring into gear, thinking of how I could regain my freedom.

Now that I think about it, I might have seen something in the appendix of one of the Assault textbooks--

When being used as a hostage, when the opponent has no weaknesses, when it's impossible to run...as the last resort, there's still the method, called: 'Lima Syndrome'.

Lima Syndrome is a situation where after a period of time, the offenders will begin sympathizing with the hostages and in the end decide to end the conflict of their own free will. It is named thus because of just such a situation that happened in 1996, when a large-scale kidnapping incident occurred in the Japanese embassy of Lima, Peru.

(But, will that method work? On this robot girl?)

Thinking about those things, I--

Click

-heard the sound of Reki inserting the magazine, completely loaded with handpicked bullets, into the Dragunov. A noise so ominous, filled with despair.

After finishing the maintenance of her gun, Reki...*Tap Tap*

Strode into the living room.

As she walked, her clothes rustled, and in a flowing movement, she pulled her scarf, part of the school uniform, off.

...What's she doing now?

Not understanding, I gazed upon her back...

Inside a small side room, upon closer investigation, there was what appeared to be a miniature washing machine. Inside it, Reki took off her headphones...

"..."

Rustle Her hands grasped the hem of her shirt.

"....."

Rustle

"--!?"

Sh-she pulled it up with one movement!

"--Wait! Wait! Why are you taking off your clothes!?"

Reki's exposed back, shining like a pearl, made me panic.

"Bathing."

"Do-don't turn around!"

"--The stains on one's body will affect one's health. Conversely, my health will affect the accuracy of my sniping and as such, I must constantly cleanse myself."

Zcch She pulled her zipper down. *Fyuu*

A-and without a moment's hesitation, sh-she even took her skirt off.

Panicked, I twisted around, my back facing Reki, who had no qualms whatsoever about exposing her unadorned, white undergarments.

"Th-that's not what I'm talking about, I-I saw it all, you know!"

"I care not."

"I care!"

"--Haimaki, come here."

Reki didn't appear to understand the reason for my resistance--
Kch, Shhhhh, Fyuu

-once again, the noise of rustling clothes reached my ears.

And the source of that noise--I had no wish of thinking about.

How dangerous is this girl?

I knew that she had no emotions, but I didn't expect that it would even extend to things like this.

Why is it that, in front of me...you can remove your clothes so calmly!

Tap Tap Tap Tap Haimaki passed by my side, and the sound of the shower door closing reached my ears...*Shhh*...the sound of a shower really started.

And my eyes, just like the shower, gushing water now, were watering. Damn it. What a horrible day.

--'Lima Syndrome'

Taking some time to establish a relationship with Reki, and afterward, convince her into letting me go.

That was my last hope of getting out of here.

(But...)

Relationships can only be formed between people.

But, facing the inhuman Reki, there doesn't seem to be any chance of success.

Which is to say, my plan has to start with educating Reki about human emotions.

And that--is a long, perhaps endless, path. But, if I don't act, there

will be no way for me to leave this Sniper Restriction. So, I have to adopt an indomitable mindset and find a way to carry out, 'Reki's humanization'...

After I too, had borrowed her shower--

-My head resting on Haimaki's back, lying on the ground, I pondered my plan in secret.

Before, his fur wet, looking like a dog, Haimaki shook himself violently on the balcony, throwing the water off and returning to normal. His fur was soft, and very comfortable.

"..."

I twisted my head to the side, and Reki, wearing a sailor uniform, was sitting upright against the wall. It appears that she has several uniforms, and she wears them alternatively.

"....."

Before, when I found out about it, I was extremely surprised, because Reki sleeps upright.

Some say that, during the Sengoku period, some warriors, for the sake of being able to react immediately to the enemy's surprise attacks, had the habit of clutching their swords while they slept. And in modern times, Reki still does that. Even while she sleeps, she does not show any weaknesses.

(Well...but, as a girl, you're full of weaknesses.)

...Wearing that kind of short skirt, sitting like that, on your knees.

I can understand that, if one sits like that while holding a sniper rifle, that stance is very stable...but, could you tell me where my eyes are supposed to look?

As a result of your present, for the sake of not seeing anything...unnecessary, I chose a very uncomfortable sleeping position. Well, I may say that, but no matter where I lie, it will be cold, bare concrete.

"...It's time for lights out. May I switch off the lights?"

Hearing her words, I glanced at my watch, it was just 9:00, not 1 second more, or less. It's no wonder there are no clocks here, her body clock is as accurate as a robot's.

"It's fine. There's nothing to do in this empty place, anyways."

I responded, almost complaining.

Pa

Reki used the muzzle of the Dragunov to push the switch of the light behind her, switching off the light. But, the Tokyo streetlights, by the sea, were shining in a little, and as such, it wasn't very dark.

"..."

Silently, Reki closed those eyes, which were like gems, floating in the midst of the darkness.

That gave me the feeling of a robot switching itself off, quieting down...But, she's still breathing. That chest, which could not be said to be well-developed, no matter how one looked at it, was rising and falling, in time with her breaths.

"..."

Reki's sleeping face, appearing in the midst of the faint light--

Such a terrifying enemy...has such an unparalleled beauty. Such that it makes me feel a little lost, a little confused.

More appropriately, this is some sort of allure, right? That face, so neat, seemed to be like a doll...fashioned from some sort of crystal, crafted lovingly by a famous artisan.

Fyuu

An aroma, reminiscent of plant-scented shampoo, wafted over, in the wake of the wind. Reki's hair, damp from her shower, under the night breeze, coming in through the partially opened window, was

slowly returning to its natural smoothness.

"...Are you asleep yet?"

"...Not yet."

Once again, Reki opened her closed eyes, looking this way.

It was only a vague feeling, but I felt that Reki was also thinking deeply, waiting for sleep to come. If it's now, I feel that I'll be able to converse with her calmly.

Thinking that way, I,

"Asking when things have come to this is a little late...but why did you take someone like me?"

I came straight out with the question that I had wanted to ask from the start.

"The 'wind' ordered me to do so."

"Wind...? What's that? Is it someone's codename?"

"Not a person. The wind is the wind."

Wind...?

Are you talking about the wind that's blowing around outside right now?

That's merely the flow of gas, a natural phenomenon. How could something like that give anybody an order?

"Then, what is the wind?"

"The wind is the wind."

...Unnn...

It looks like continuing to ask along this line of thought is a waste of time. There's a feeling that we'll back and forth: "What's that?" "That's the wind," for all eternity.

--Let's ask about something else to start up a conversation.

"...You said, 'order'? Then, this proposal, mm...is like an arranged marriage, and is not of your own free will?"

"Yes."

...Hey, hey...

I couldn't stop my face from twitching.

"...Will you obey that...wind, no matter what it says? I don't understand, even if the wind makes you marry someone like me...you don't care?"

I asked blankly. Reki--

"--I am a single bullet. A bullet has no heart. Therefore, it does not think--"

She used the mantra-like words that she always said when firing, to respond.

--It does not think.

Which is to say, as long as the wind wills it so, you will, just like a bullet, always fly out in response to the pull of the trigger, and devotedly obey?

"..."

I...had no way of asking anything about the restriction anymore.

Because, I had already realized that, no matter what I asked, it would be useless.

It isn't possible for Reki's thoughts to suddenly change. Because, she never had her own thoughts to begin with.

This may seem like a rhetoric, but in principle, it is impossible to make 'nothingness' undergo 'change'.

Heaving a sigh at this conversation, completely meaningless, I--

"Then...since we're playing house, what should I do?"

I asked about something else I was worried about.

Is it fine if I just laze around, playing the part of a useless husband?

"I don't know."

...You don't know, you say. You didn't think about this at all, did you?

"But, Kinji-san and I are no longer children, physically."

Reki brushed off her headphones lightly, continuing tonelessly,

"While living together, just leave the rest to your natural instincts--that's what the wind told me."

"Natural instincts...?"

"Yes. The wind said, we would naturally have children."

Children...

"Children!?"

Children!

My head slipped off Haimaki's back, the back of my skull violently colliding with the concrete floor.

Fr-from marriage, this topic turned to children.

...Which is to say, th-that kind of thing!

That's impossible for me! Absolutely impossible! From the beginning, as for girls, I--

-wanted to refuse, but Reki probably already knows about my Hysteria Mode. Which means, having already exposed my arousal from Reki's kiss, I have no right to say anything.

"Just, I don't know what I should do...so, I'll leave everything to

Kinji-san. Kinji-san appears to be quite familiar with this, and wives should give everything to their husbands, as well."

Reki's calm voice made me sit up violently.

"Yo-you said that, "Kinji-san appears to be familiar with this,"...What is that supposed to mean?"

"Kinji-san is liked by many girls, so I believe that you are very familiar with the relationships between men and women."

"I-I'm not familiar at all. If I had to use an adjective, it would be 'slow'. Because, I am somebody that always avoids girls. I think you know this too, but it's for the sake of not activating the sickness that is Hysteria Mode."

I said, as if venting my feelings, and I lay back down on Haimaki's stomach.

"Anyways, even if the one in a million chance that a girl likes me occurs...then, they'd just like the me in Hysteria Mode. The normal me is just a useless, uninteresting high schooler."

"--Wrong."

Reki directly refuted my words.

"Outside of HSS...of Hysteria Mode, you hide a different, amazing power."

"...?"

Outside of...Hysteria Mode?

This is the first time I had ever heard someone say this.

"--One of them being, your submerged charisma. Such things are hard for one to notice about oneself."

"Submerged...?"

Now that I think about it...Before, Tsuduri-sensei also said

something like this.

She said that I have "a sort of charisma".

"That is the characteristic of a leader. The characteristic of a general."

...General?

She's talking about generals.

"When you were fighting with I-U, you activated a certain core ability, gathering numerous allies about you--even your enemies were swayed under your influence, becoming your companions. And this, is unquestionably the growth of your unique charisma. After all, once an excellent general appears, warriors will naturally gather around him."

"...Hey..."

I shook my head.

"Even in Hysteria Mode, I am weaker than you. My abilities, as compared to Nii-san and father is such that I feel shame over my inexperience. How could I have that kind of charisma?"

"A general does not need unparalleled intelligence, or power. That is something that each warrior should have. And, I'm not stating this in relation to Hysteria Mode, but stating this in relation to that particular part of Kinji-san."

"..."

I turned around, my back facing Reki.

Reki's personality...is such that she will not lie.

So, that probably isn't flattery, but her true beliefs.

"..."

I...

Without even looking at a mirror, I know that my cheeks are slightly red.

I may not know why...but, I'm abnormally embarrassed.

I feel that...having that kind of direct affirmation of something inside me that isn't Hysteria Mode, is too much. But, this is something that I have never heard before, throughout my entire life.

I had no idea of how I should react.

"Also, just now, Kinji-san said, you are 'weaker than me'--But, I know that if Kinji-san were serious, you would be stronger. You are still conserving, locking away, your true power."

"--Don't say any more."

My voice, a little deeper, halted Reki.

Reki wasn't wrong...that battle from just now...

If I had wanted to, I wouldn't have needed to run away.

If my heart could accept killing somebody...

I could have eradicated Reki and Haimaki. I could have wiped them out.

"...I don't wish to use that kind of power, and I will never use it again. Using my full strength against you, what will it achieve?"

"..."

"Guns, swords, whichever one is stronger--is meaningless for me. I'll take this opportunity to explain this to you, next year, I will drop out of this school and transfer to a normal high school. So? What do you think? That is how I truly feel. Unexpected, isn't it?"

"No--If you do that, I will drop out of Butei High as well, and follow you to a normal high school."

Reki's answer could not help but make me twist around.

This...was the first time I had seen such a reaction.

Despite the fact that, as long as they heard me say such a thing, Aria's, even Shirayuki's expression would freeze.

"--A person's personality is not reliant upon which school they go to. No matter which school you go to, Kinji-san will be Kinji-san."

Still sitting upright, Reki, just as always, was looking down at the floor, and she asked,

"Is there something that Kinji-san wants to do, going to a normal high school?"

Hearing Reki's counter-question, I was a little tongue-tied.

"...This..I'll think about it after I transfer."

"I see."

Reki's tone, seeming to carry a hint of the question, "that's not how it really is, right?" made me feel as if I was being led--

"Probably...there might be something."

The words casually slipped out of my mouth, retracting my previous statement, meant to disguise my true intention.

"But...that is just a dream, hidden in my heart. In reality...I've never worked for it at all. So now, I can just drag myself through my Butei High days. As if just hanging in the air, suspended by a string."

I understood very clearly that this wouldn't do. But, even with that, my heart...knew that the school I was attending now had no way of allowing me to take that very first step.

"..."

As if knowing my thoughts, as if understanding me, Reki...didn't say anything.

(Reki...)

To be honest, I...never thought that I'd be able to talk to her about this.

Reflecting on this in my heart, I glanced towards the side of Reki's face.

Reki has never showed any care for others. No matter who she faces, she will never form any reassuring expressions, never any promising smiles.

As a result, she has no friends. If I had to name one, Aria would be the only one she could call friend.

And I--

-had never thought that I would tell Reki my true feelings.

The me in Butei High would never speak my mind to anybody. That is because, there is nobody in this place that would be able to talk about this kind of thing with me.

Thinking about this, my feelings, full of rejection against Reki just a moment ago...

Seemed to have flipped slightly.

Flipped--which is to say, I felt a certain closeness.

"..."

I'm not sure whether she felt the same as I, but Reki, who seemed to be only moving her eyes, looked directly into mine.

"..."

That wordless stare, Reki's gaze...

Slowly...

I may be wrong, but it felt as if she was waiting for some sort of order.

(...Order...)

Now that I think about it, just now...I acquired an invisible remote to this person in front of me, Reki.

--Acquired that remote, which had only one missing button: 'Go far away.'

...

But, as opposed to that, there was a button which said, 'Come here'.

...

...No, no. I can't...!

Because I had relaxed a little, I had thought of it for an instant.

A little embarrassed, I turned my head a little, but those light-pink colored lips, opened in the midst of that shining porcelain-like skin, flashed into my eyes.

(...Just now, those lips suddenly...touched mine...)

Reki's lips--

Apparently reacting to my gaze, she shifted, perhaps a millimeter.

Suddenly feeling as if my thoughts had been seen, I became a little agitated.

...This isn't good.

I had only noticed it now, but Reki, whether it be in terms of strength, or in terms of Hysteria Mode...she was the strongest enemy I had faced so far.

To put it briefly, I had already understood that she was someone so beautiful, someone whom the more you looked at her, the more beautiful she seemed--

And, although I don't wish to admit it, but she definitely has...as compared to Aria, Shirayuki, Riko...a completely different allure.

"We...we should sleep. The opening ceremony for the 2nd semester is tomorrow. I don't want to be late on the first day of school."

I said, turning my head towards the ceiling. I used Haimaki's tail as a eyeshade, covering my eyes with it.

The moment that I had seen Reki's face before I turned my eyes away, it was expressionless, the same as ever, but--

For some reason, I had a slight feeling...

That that face was filled with an immeasurable sorrow.

2nd Ammo: Water Tossing

September 1--

During the opening ceremony on the first day of the second semester, the Japanese students of Butei High will respect international tradition, wearing an imitation uniform of the first Butei High in the world, Butei High - Rome, the completely black uniform which is called, 'Diviza Nero'.

The students, dressed completely in black, sat up straight on the folding chairs, in a phalanx-like formation.

This scene was almost like the assembly of a miniature army division, or perhaps a Yakuza funeral.

The curtain, full of patched up bullet-holes, opened left and right, and on the stage, the principal, Midorimatsu, was standing in the center, at the lectern, giving a speech about the international co-operation between Butei.

He said something about public safety continuing to worsen, but Japan was still a safe country, so as such, Tokyo Butei High will be accepting exchange students for the sake of the students' growth in a tense situation.

...Hey. Please don't make the situation in the school any more tense.

It was probably because of Butei High's new policy, but sitting in one corner of the room were students from Hong Kong Butei High.

There were not only high school students, but there seemed to be middle school students as well...even somebody like an elementary school student. As expected of foreigners.

(But, it might not be too long before the era comes where Japan, like America, will legally issue firearm licenses to 5 year old children.)

Having not slept much in Reki's room last night, I thought of those things, stifling a yawn.

It is common practice that one cannot be absent from the opening ceremony of the second semester. However, delinquents like Riko, or busy students like Aria still neglect it. So, all those that sit here are the good students, the slackers, or those failing students, who like me, came so their credits would not drop.

And Reki...after she had accompanied me to school, because she was performing in the ceremony after the opening ceremony--using a pistol or sniper rifle as a replacement for the marching band's batons--she went to the preparation room of the auditorium.

As such, I am able to do this, enjoying my temporary freedom.

But, as long as I am within a 2 kilometer radius of that Dragunov, I am still in the palm of Reki's hand.

And, Haimaki was idly crouching by my feet, and once in a while, he would, with an expression which said: "If you dare run, I'll report it to my master," look up at me. Damn it.

I couldn't help but glare angrily at the Haimaki by my feet...

"Tohyama-kun, is it alright if I sit next to you?"

"Yo, Kinji. Looks like you aren't getting held back a year after all."

Two male students moved to the seats by my side, in unison. The good student Shiranui and the slacker Muto.

The handsome Shiranui was already cheerful, even though it was the first day of the second semester, and Muto was still wearing an expression of yearning for the summer holidays, stubble building up on his chin. The contrast between you two is amazingly strong.

"Kinji, I heard a rumor. Yesterday, you ran into some shooting spree, broke the glass off my four-wheel drive, forcing me to track down my insurance company..."

Ah? The car that I hid in yesterday was Muto's?

Well...I'll just pretend that I don't know what he's talking about for now. After all, the person who actually broke the glass was Reki.

Also, I still haven't paid Muto back for breaking his Gyro Canopy while we were arguing.

"--Besides that small matter...Tohyama-kun. Another scandal has been raised because of your relationship with a girl, you know?"

Radiating normal Butei behavior with the mention of a shooting spree as, 'that small matter', Shiranui interrupted from the other side.

He was chuckling as if he had run into something amusing. This guy definitely thinks that since it has nothing to do with him, he can just spectate from the side.

"Are you serious!? Damn it! Why!? Why is it always only Kinji!?"

"Don't shout so loud, Muto. It's the opening ceremony right now. Anyways, Shiranui, how did you know?"

"'Know' is inaccurate, rather, I deduced this. As I was doing early sword-training in Assault--Kanzaki-san was throwing a huge tantrum. So, I thought that it might have something to do with Tohyama-kun."

Kanzaki...Aria-san was throwing a huge tantrum?

Just thinking about it makes me shiver.

Incidentally, morning practice would refer to some specific subject practice in a normal school, but in Butei High, it refers to morning battle training.

"Once again, it's become a pretty popular topic. It's said that--This morning, Tohyama-kun and Snipe's Reki-san came out of the girl's dormitory together when they were going to school."

While saying this, Shiranui, as if trying to prove the existence of the relationship between Reki and I, stroked Haimaki's back.

"--This time it's Reki!? Ah-, but, I can understand that. A dark boy and a wordless girl fit each other, after all. But, Kinji, you've taken action against somebody dangerous again. Reki has a lot of secret fans. You might get caught in a multi-directional crossfire one day, you know? You sure are unlucky, Kinji."

Agreed.

Now, not only am I being observed by Reki, but the number of guns pointed at me are increasing...

Unable to explain the situation to Muto, who was laughing and patting my back from behind, I...dipped in my head in despair.

"...There's another popular topic going around, because Kanzaki-san and Reki-san get along well. It's said that, after Kanzaki-san finished throwing a tantrum, she was very depressed about losing both her friend and lover."

What...is that supposed to mean?

Are you saying that, Reki = Friend, and I = Lover?

"Hey. Aria and I aren--"

"There's a lot of this kind of trouble around this season. After all, 'Caravan I' is about to arrive."

I had seen it many times, but as I was trying to defend myself, Shiranui's overly brilliant smile cut me short.

--Caravan I.

Now that he mentions it, it's true that it's about to arrive.

In Butei High, sophomores have two training trips. The first one is 'Caravan I'.

From the name, it might appear to be a normal school trip, but in truth, it is an activity for the sake of making the final corrections in the teams formed between students.

This is because...when Butei High students reach their second year, they have to form and register themselves as 2~8 man teams before the end of September.

An unexpectedly important result of this team system is that, the registered teams will in turn, be registered in the IADA[2].

Normally, Butei will move in those teams as units, fulfilling the activity. Even if they split up later due to their own goals, the mutual co-operation in that team takes precedence over entire organizational relationship--this is also laid down in International Butei Law.

"It's popular, because there are a lot of cases where the formation of a team is affected by boy-girl relationships. Because Tohyama-kun was unable to solve his personal matters."

"About that, I've pretty much decided who I'm going to team up with. We're going to take members from both Logi and Amdo, forming a logistics unit. There are girls too, you know. It's Hiraga Aya though, so there's nothing to get excited about."

There are no firm criteria, but normally, teams will be either assault teams, logistics teams, communications teams, or mixed teams etc., completely different types and fields. As a result, different teams will work together.

Using an army analogy, it would be like the image of sections coming together to form a platoon.

Therefore, this isn't something like normal high school groups, where getting along well is the focus, but rather, a team formed with tactics and strategy taken into account.

To sum it up in a sentence...team formation is something that requires a lot of thinking.

Especially for me, who doesn't have many friends, and is now engaged to Reki, this is a massive undertaking. Just thinking about it gives me a headache..

"Tohyama-kun is going to form an assault team, right? Or maybe a

reconnaissance team?"

"I haven't decided on anything yet. I'm busy enough earning credits, so I have to postpone it for now."

"Ahh, that's a problem. Tohyama-kun, the next time you wear this, what are you going to do?"

Said Shiranui, pointing to my black tie. The next time I wear this? He's probably talking about the team photo at team registration.

During team registration, according to the rules, the team members have to have a photograph taken of them...and they have to wear this bulletproof uniform - black while taking the photo. It's rumored that this is for the sake of preventing offenders from being able to recognize which Butei High the students come from.

I remember, when we saw our senpai's team photos last year...they were all looking away from the lens on purpose, turning their heads slightly to the side or even downwards. That's probably so their appearance wasn't completely shown.

Really, this is an amazingly dangerous school. Having to take so much care with just a photo.

The opening ceremony finished--and on the path in front of the auditorium, the girls from class C started the parade as Little Eva's 'The Loco-Motion' was playing.

On their heads were feathered military caps, their bodies clothed with extravagant uniforms. Their hands grasping their batons, the girls--

Whoosh, whoosh. Roll.

Their white, pleated miniskirts fluttering, they span their replacements for batons, assault rifles and sniper rifles, marching forward in two lines on the road, sealed off from traffic.

At times, Butei High will imitate the Police Force and the Self-Defense Force, holding a music or dance concert, reason being, they

wished to improve their image with the people. And according to the principal's plan, the performers would be female. Aria and Shirayuki also performed as cheerleaders at Adseard in May.

But...no matter when I see it, I always hate these performances.

On both sides of the road, watching the parade was the local people, as well as the media. There were also boys, holding up cameras with lenses as long as bazookas, frantically snapping

pictures of the girls. You guys, you know that you're falling right into the principal's trap, right? Their appearance may be no different from cute high school girls, but the female students over here are actually dangerous people that play with real bazookas.

Not being able to withhold a sigh, I--

-as if trying to escape from Reki, who was twirling her Dragunov in the midst of the marching band, her face expressionless as always...I left.

Behind me, Haimaki tailed me, not letting his guard down. At any rate, you. You've been suspecting me, following me ever since just now, right? You stepped on my shoes on purpose, and you even urinated over my clothes when I left the auditorium's male changing room.

The bulletproof uniform - black that I was wearing in the auditorium was borrowed, so I could just throw it inside the 'return' basket and be done with it, but the uniform I'm wearing now is mine. If you dare dirty it, I will spare you no mercy.

(...Reki, Haimaki, team formation...no matter which one it is, so troublesome...)

And to add to my annoyance, today was the day of Butei High's horrible tradition, 'Water Tossing'

Originally, 'Water Tossing' evolved from the special battle method that the principal's old school had had, "On the day of the opening ceremony, you can splash water onto anybody."

Splashing each other with water may be very safe, but once this reached Butei High, the rules, for some reason, became, "as long as you're unarmed, you can fight with anybody you like," a real battle method, and it spread around the school.

(Masters tolerates this activity as well. Really...)

My head hurting again, I decided to head to the pharmacy at the Medica building.

But, I was afraid that if I walked the main road, I would run into the danger that is 'Water Tossing', so I took a small road.

As I walked out of the parade, the sound of it getting farther and farther...

Fuah.

Fuah.

Fuaah.

What...?

Bubble...?

Suddenly, in front of me, who was walking down the small alley, a bubble appeared.

* Pop, Pop Pop* They popped in front of my face.

"--You just died three times."

Immediately after, the sound of a girl's undeveloped voice came from above my head.

I raised my head to look, and one foot hooked into the gutter of the building...was a small girl.

...Who's she?

"**Japan**'s Butei High isn't very noteworthy. You're too vulnerable."

The girl was wearing something reminiscent of one of the outfits of a zombie in 'Reigen Doushi'--a modified, abnormal outfit using the Qing Dynasty's imperial outfit as a basis.

Added to that, her accent...she was probably one of those exchange students from Hong Kong Butei High.

"...There something?"

In a bad mood, I narrowed my eyes, staring at her, who was

adroitly drinking something out of a gourd...

"Kyuu!"

Spin, Tap

The girl laughed shrilly, and she landed in the alley lightly, just like a trapeze artist.

Shhh

Her black twintails, tied on the left and right, followed the movement of her body, falling down.

"My, name, is Koko. Tell me your name."

--Height, around 1.40 meters. She's still a kid.

The corners of her eyes were streaked with red eyeshadow, making her already slanted eyes become even more obviously tilted. And she also had a cute appearance that would make a certain group of men drool in appreciation...But...

For some reason...Her appearance seems familiar, as if she looks similar to somebody. Just a coincidence?

"I am Tohyama Kinji."

Since she had already told me her name, I returned the favor.

After all, I don't wish to make anybody think that Japanese people don't have any manners.

"Aiya! Aiyayayayayaya!"[3]

The girl, who had called herself Koko, shouted to the heavens exaggeratedly.

What. Is there something wrong with my name?

At any rate, you've been asking for trouble from the beginning.

"...Hey. Why do you smell like alcohol? Children shouldn't drink."

Seeing me lecture her, pointing at the gourd, Koko's eyes widened, saying,

"--I'm not a child! Koko turned 14 yesterday!"

Buwaa! She yelled, a strong smell of alcohol intermixed with her breath.

She's probably drunk. I heard that China didn't have any age restrictions on the consumption of alcohol.

But...this kind of conversation...Why is it that this feels kind of familiar?

"I can't help it, I'll just have to test you a little. If you leave the princess, some painful things will happen immediately."

Apparently not too familiar with Japanese, Koko said these incomprehensible things--

Whoosh, Whoosh...As if stumbling, she fell down...before she did a flip, *Pa!*

She suddenly charged towards me!

--This kind of reaction--

It's exactly the same as when I first met Aria! How unlucky can I be!

"--!'

Reflexively, I reached my hand out, and Koko's feet--twisted around my hand.

Wh-what is this? This movement. It's random, as if the movement itself is drunk--

It completely nullified my subconscious counterattack.

Koko, like a snake, slithered around my body, *whoosh*. She got onto my back.

And she brought a rope around both sides of my neck...? No, she's using both of her twin tails.

"Hehe!"

Laughing in my ear, Koko even twisted her two legs around my neck.

Twist...Twist!

--Ne-neck--

It's being clamped. If this were Judo, it would be called a choke.

(This kind of clamping technique...exists...!)

The choke I mentioned earlier is an unarmed technique where, once it is tightened, it's impossible to loosen.

And, this isn't an infraction of the rules. Not only her limbs, but her hair, it's an abnormally complex stance, almost like a coiled rope.

This girl is an exchange student--where did she hear about 'Water Tossing'?

"Hehe, how is it? You can't do anything, can you? A man that cannot do anything, is a man that nobody needs. I'm going to kill you."

"Kill...me?"

Breaking out into a cold sweat, I forced those words out.

It may look like this, but I'm a Butei. If I got a 100 yen coin for every time I heard the word 'kill' in a threat, I'd be able to have a mansion built by now.

But, this isn't just a threat!

(Sh-she really wants to kill me!)

--Only now did that electric feeling of true danger really run through my body.

This is a problem beyond the rules of "Water Tossing".

Panicked, I reached my hand towards my Beretta--but at that moment, I noticed that even my limbs were also being restricted by the girl's legs' vice-like grip.

"--!"

If one wants to initiate Aru＝Kata, they have to be at striking distance.

And like this, when I'm at zero-distance, drawn into grappling--arms restricted, making it impossible to resist--it's a position where guns cannot be used.

It's the exact opposite as the fight with Reki, where she was out of range, unable to be touched by my bullets. This is a battle where guns have been rendered ineffective by the sheer lack of distance.

(Da-dangerous...Really...!)

Inside me, whose consciousness was slowly going hazy--

This tight feeling, being pressed so closely against a female body, which was so much like Aria's, as well as the feeling of getting choked to death melded together, *Thump*...creating an irregular heartbeat.

(Th-this is...)

It's different from normal, but I'm afraid that this is...Hysteria Mode.

And, this is the Hysteria Mode that Nii-san had told me about, the Hysteria Mode when dying.

Hysteria Agonizante.

(I-I've been pressured into such a place!?)

But, in the last of the last, this awakening was my trump card.

Counter-choke techniques started appearing clearly in my mind, which had been panicking all along.

Standing out was one line of thought: Performing a wall hit on Koko, biting her hand viciously, attempting to harm her--

Bad...This girl, wrong.

My mind in Hysteria Mode revealed the reality that that would just make the situation more severe.

This isn't a feasible method of releasing a choke.

"Hihi! Shanshikeikeihou!"[4]

...*Creak*...*Creak*...

(M-my cervical vertebrae...!)

My cervical vertebrae is about to be snapped!

A creak rang out from my neck area, and my consciousness was becoming more and more hazy.

My line of sight started to flicker on and off, my eyes couldn't see anything anymore.

--The corresponding action is too late. The opponent is a girl, so it's impossible for me to choose that method.

Even though I'm in Hysteria Mode, there's no way for me to do anything...!

I-I'm done...!

--*GRROARR!*

Immediately after the roar blasted towards us, *Ba!*

Koko suddenly released her hair and limbs.

--*Thud*

I sprawled forward, subconsciously raising my head.

In front of me, Haimaki, who appeared to have just smashed Koko off me, was standing there, his hair and tail completely on end, growling softly.

My neck...hadn't snapped. That was really in the nick of time. But, golden stars were still appearing in my field of vision, and I felt dizzy.

--*Tap, Tap*

Koko turned a flip in the air agilely, retreating to another side of

the alley.

"The dog that princess is raising is far more useful than you."

Afterward, she made a face at me.

"**I** am, "**Ten-Thousand Arms**" Koko--"The Warrior of Ten-Thousand Techniques" Kinchi, 0 points."

Saying this, she waved, as if saying goodbye.

"You have to study. Afterwards, I'll test you again. **Goodbye**."

Reaching the edge of the corner...she disappeared.

And I--could only gaze at that back, in a daze.

What on Earth is this...that started happening yesterday.

Could you please keep terrible misfortune to one day?

Sniped by Reki, losing to the hands of an exchange student...Isn't that two defeats in a row?

Inside Butei High, where turning swords and guns on each other is a perfectly acceptable and common thing, things like attempted murder are outright ignored, a regrettable reality.

Even if I reported: "I was nearly killed by an exchange student in an alley," to a teacher, I'd definitely have: "If you lost, then go challenge them again!" shouted at me while I'm getting kicked out of their office.

The Butei watchword for this is, 'Defeat from the Bottom'--It's recognized as a humilation defeat in Butei High, a defeat where one is beaten by his underclassmen.

The opponent was a middle school student, and also a girl, who are weaker than men by default. Also, I lost to her unarmed, this was a humiliation deep within mere humiliation. Were I to make an analogy to Mahjong, it would be similar to the humiliation of

Yakuman defeat.

I don't care about my reputation within the school, but if this gets spread around to everybody, I'll just be a laughingstock.

So, I kept my mouth shut, pretending that it never happened.

But--

(The feel of Koko's battle ability...seems to be on the same level as Aria's, if not higher...)

I heard that the training that Assault Butei go through in China is wholly different from the training they go through in Japan.

--Once they discover a person with some sort of special attribute, the Butei High there will initiate a special training program.

If that attribute is guns, then they will train them with guns. If it's knives, then they'll be trained with knives. Nothing else. It seems that, using this method, China trained up several Butei with these differing skills.

Which is to say, that girl from just now was probably trained in martial arts from a very young age, a true expert.

(She's Chinese, isn't she...If it was her, that's how she'd say it, right?)

I thought, looking to the side, towards Reki, who had finished the parade, changing back to her sailor uniform...

Already completely released from Hysteria Mode, I was just relaxing in one of Odaiba's main streets.

Why am I here, you ask. That's because, I want to get something to eat.

Under continuous pressure just now and wanting to vent my frustrations by stuffing myself, I went to the school cafeteria, but upon my entrance, I was surrounded by a group of...abnormal boys.

Apparently taking Reki as a Goddess and worshiping her, they started shouting things like: "Please tell me about the daily life of Reki-sama!" "Is her face cute when sleeping!?" "DIE!", all directed at me.

Well, which is to say, it was the situation that Muto had warned me about this morning. Taking advantage of the rules of Water Tossing.

And beside me, whose neck and limbs were being twisted in impossible directions, Reki, standing there with the Dragunov on her back, appeared to have decided not to interfere. And Haimaki used his back leg to scratch his ears, yawning loudly. Hey, you guys acting like this...I'm really going to burst into tears, you know?

In the search of another place where I could eat--since the convenience store and family restaurant had been occupied by Reki's fan club, I had given up the thought of eating on Academy Island...and like this, I went all the way to Odaiba.

Well..there's no classes today anyways, since it's the opening ceremony.

Because of the Japanese Early Summer Phenomenon - Typhoon, the wind in the street was a little strong, but the weather was pretty good. Just strolling down the streets like this is a pretty good way of relaxing one's heart.

But...

"....."

Even though she had been so talkative last night, Reki-sama had said nearly nothing today.

And, I had a vague feeling that she didn't seem very happy. She was expressionless as ever, though, so I had no way of confirming it.

As I walked and thought about this sniper girl--

Fyuu

A low breeze brushed by us--*Flutter*

Reki's rouge pleated skirt flipped up in an extremely dangerous manner.

"...!"

But, Reki didn't care at all.

Since she hadn't tried to resist the wind at all, the snow-white curve of her thigh--and a military-used band of velcro, as well as the bayonet tucked inside it, was exposed, for all to see.

It had gone up, but it was still barely in the safe zone.

"Hey. Reki...by your feet. Be careful."

I pointed it out to this robot girl, who apparently, was not programmed with any embarrassment or shyness functions.

Reki scanned by her feet, as if she was looking out for a landmine...

"...?"

She raised her head, looking at me. It didn't seem like she knew what I was trying to bring to her attention.

She's impossible...really, I have to think of a solution quickly.

Scared that another gust of wind would blow, I--ran into Odaiba Water City.

"Haimaki, sit. Wait here."

Following me, Reki made Haimaki wait by the automatic doors.

Hey, is it really all right if you leave a wolf in this kind of place?

"..."

I glanced at Reki out of the corner of my eye, who was following me into the stores with quick strides.

I'm enveloped in all sorts of problems, but right now, the biggest problem is the matter of Reki's Sniper Restriction.

If I don't think of something to solve it, I won't be able to handle the other problems.

(...'Lima Syndrome'...)

The trump card of extricating myself from Reki's clutches--'Lima Syndrome'.

For the sake of its success, I have to establish a good relation with Reki. But, if I want to establish a relationship, the receiving end of the relationship has to be a person.

Which is to say, I have to humanize Robot Reki.

But, no matter how I think about this, it's a huge difficulty in itself.

I have no idea what to do.

But, I have to do it.

Otherwise, I'll have to spend the rest of my days together with Reki.

Even if I have to make things up on the spot, I have to force the initiation of Plan: Humanizing Reki.

Reaching the fifth floor, the one dedicated to restaurants and the like, I, thinking that I could eat anything, as long as I could fill myself up, asked,

"Is there something you want to eat, Reki?"

After all, you'll definitely answer with "I don't care."

"I don't care."

See?

Well, I already predicted it.

"Then, let's go eat ramen. The ramen sold at Shintojyou is really good."

Community, companion, friends. The meaning of such is captured in the English word 'Company', which, linguistically, originally meant 'eating bread together'. Like this, eating together is an important action that aids the building of a human relationship.

If all goes well, I might be able to use the meal as an opportunity over which we can reconcile, leading the solution into a new dawn of hope.

So, I brought Reki--

-to Odaiba's best ramen shop, the ever-crowded Shintojyou.

Sitting opposite Reki at a small table, thinking of scoring some points with her, I said,

"I'll treat today."

And then saying to a waiter who had come forth,

"I want one bowl of Char Siu noodles. And for her, the most expensive thing on the menu."

Having come here many times before, I ordered, relying on the memory embedded deep in my brain, not even needing to flip through the menu.

Well, there's 3000 yen inside my wallet. I shouldn't have a problem, budget-wise.

...*Flicker*, I looked at Reki using my peripheral vision, gauging her reaction.

"....."

Only to see that she, like a statue, was sitting like a death row victim on the chair opposite me, completely still. Her head was facing forward, her eyes seemingly looking downwards a little...But what they were looking at was not me, but an empty void...Scary. Those eyes really look like a doll's.

Anyways, can't you at least take your headphones off when we enter a restaurant?

(But...Reki really doesn't fit in, in this kind of loud and busy shop. It doesn't suit well with her at all.)

Even if I'm the one who brought her here.

Helplessly, I rested my chin in the palm of my hand, looking out upon the sight of Tokyo Bay.

Above the multitude of ships, leaving several white trails on the surface of the sparkling, blue water, were seagulls, lightly flying around Empty Island, where there's a billboard for the musical, 'The Wizard of Oz' had been constructed.

This panorama, this kind of relaxation, it's so comfortable.

In my mind, I thought that, if Reki were to be cast in 'The Wizard of Oz', she would definitely be the heartless tin man. Thinking of those things, which were of no importance, I drifted off into a daydream.

"..."

"..."

Completely wordless, we just sat there, waiting for the food to arrive.

Whenever I teamed up with a girl in a Butei High activity--my personality is such that, I would always be this silent.

Because, I have nothing to talk about with girls.

(...This kind of silence is kind of tiring, though.)

In light of that, while the person in front of me is a girl, she is--Reki.

Because she's just sitting there, just like a tin man, I don't need to pay attention to anything.

Putting it that way, Reki...for me, might be, a rare and treasured

girl.

But, the image of Aria, who is boyish as well, another person that I didn't need to take care even when she's around, invaded another corner of my mind.

Well, it's true that conversation is a fundamental part of building a good relationship, but there's an old saying, haste makes waste. If I talk about denpa things like Ulus or Virus or whatever, in this kind of public place, I'll just be taken for a lunatic. So, the fact that I can relax here, gazing upon the ocean and the sky, healing my scarred soul from all the trauma it had gone through, was indeed, a good thing.

"--Sorry to keep you waiting!"

A familiar voice jarred me, making my head slip off my hand and smash into the table.

I looked up--

"Fu-Fuuma!?"

Lezzad freshman, Fuuma Hina.

My female kouhai, wearing an apron as part of a waitress outfit, was holding a tray, delivering the ramen.

This girl...I was wondering why she didn't come to the opening ceremony, but it looks like she was doing this kind of training.

"Master, I have delivered the objects you have ordered. Please, eat well."

A broad smile on her face, Fuuma, *Tap*, placed the bowl of char siu noodles in front of me.

...What is this...The char siu had been made into 卍 shapes. Were you trying to make shurikens? That was...amazingly pointless. With this, the mass became smaller.

Fuuma apparently thought that she had done something wonderful, and she had an expression on her face which was begging, "Master, praise me!" With that expression, she's probably expecting me to say something like, "Ooohh, that's amazing, Fuuma. You're an excellent ninja," right?

Well, I'll just ignore it.

Pa In front of me, who was snapping open the chopsticks unhappily--*Thud*

Fuuma placed a container of ramen onto the table. It seemed that the gravitational pull was such that Fuuma's ponytail hung in the air as it thudded to the flat surface.

"What...what on Earth is this..."

The ramen...was served in a pot. And that pot was so big that somebody could easily fit their head inside it.

"This is what Reki-dono ordered, the store's best, the most expensive item--Super pot ramen."

"...Hey! This isn't an amount that a human being can eat! Even an elephant wouldn't be able to finish this! This shouldn't be on the menu!"

"--It is. This is an order that was put on offer this month."

Flip On the menu that Fuuma had opened...

"New item - Super pot ramen! 5000 yen, *But, if it can be finished within 30 minutes, it's free!*"

Clipped in between the pages was a thick piece of paper, newly written.

Hey, this is 5...5000 yen!

Then...Then, aren't I about to eat a meal that I can't pay for!?

"Wait, today, I only brought three thousand..."

Not even sparing me a glance, Fuuma--as if exposing her true personality as a ninja, she smirked, turning towards Reki,

"Kukuku....As master's close friend for more than four years, I will be the one to lead the assault this time! I specially suggested these

rations, which will definitely bring harmony between you two--this is only a small challenge! Then, 30 minutes, starts now! Ready, set, go!"

Fuuma's ponytail, called chonmage in Japan, swished through the air, and she pressed the button on the stopwatch.

"...!"

I--turned my head towards Reki, who was nearly completely hidden by the pot.

"..."

Pachin

The disposable chopsticks, she tore them apart.

Yo-you're going to fight? Challenging this...this colossal enemy, Super pot ramen.

And, why did I just hallucinate that a light gleamed in Reki's eyes?

"..."

Reki extended the chopsticks, clipping one strand of noodles.

Chew

She bit the tip of the noodle.

And, *Shuuuuuu*...*Shuuu*...

She ate it.

She just ate the noodles.

And, *Chew*. *Shuuuu*

Strand by strand, she ate without pause.

"..."

Under my fixated stare, Reki continued to use that unique method of eating to draw the noodles into her mouth.

Am-amazing. There's no interval at all between one strand and the next. Was ramen something that you could eat with such small movements?

Before I knew it--

Reki had eaten all the noodles in the pot.

In a mere 5 minutes.

"..."

Afterward--

Reki, *Shuu*

Chew

Used her chopsticks to eat a prawn, part of the side dish.

And, *Shuu, Pa*

She ate a quail egg.

Shuu, Pa *Shuu, Pa* *Shuu Pa*

Shitake, cuttlefish, mushrooms...

All the side dishes in the pot were being devoured, without so much as a break.

"Wh...Wh-what...what is this...?"

Fuuma looked at the stopwatch in shock. To tell the truth, it doesn't surprise me that she's stunned.

Because...just as the 10 minute mark passed, Reki had...eaten all the noodles and side dishes inside that enormous pot.

And while Fuuma was watching, so it's impossible for her to claim

that Reki cheated.

Uu...

Seeing Reki seem to struggle, lifting the enormous pot....I reached out, helping her bring it off the table...

Reki placed those small lips by the edge of the pot...

Ku.

Ku...Ku.

She...She's drinking the soup...!

Ku...Ku.

A-are you alright? You're not going to die, right? If you don't do this, I'll have a criminal record, but your life is, ever so slightly, more important. Don't force yourself.

But, ignoring my worried thoughts...

The soup...was completely finished...!

Reki had completely finished the enormous pot of ramen, which even a Sumo wrestler would have to undergo a siege with.

"--According to my senses, as of this moment, 10 minutes and 47 seconds has passed since Fuuma-san started the stopwatch."

Saying this while placing the pot back on the table, Reki's expression was as always, completely unchanged.

Am...Amazing...

I never knew, never would have thought that you could eat so much! No, this isn't a matter of being able to eat. Are you fostering a black hole in your stomach?

"...Ah...Ahhhh...!"

Her gaze flickering between the stopwatch and the pot, Fuuma

screamed with a broken voice.

And, *Shh* Dressed like a waitress, she flopped down on the floor, right there and then.

"Th...This is a dream...This is...a nightmare...!"

...I understand, Fuuma.

You are still a freshman. You haven't been desensitized to this kind of abnormal scene yet.

But, as students of Butei High, it is definite that supernatural people like Vlad or Sherlock will one day, appear in front of you. At that time, you can't be surprised when those abnormal things flash to life before your eyes. Before that, you have to train yourself to get used to these paranormal sights.

With that, while I was thinking those senpai-like words in my heart...

I felt a wave of relief wash over me, since I would not be counted among the ranks of ex-offenders. I held onto my heart, well...more like my wallet, keeping it close.

The Butei threefold punishment. Such words exist.

That may be a really extreme expression, but if a Butei is caught breaking the law, he receives a heavier punishment than a normal person...using just now as an example, if I really didn't have enough money to pay the bill, I would have received threefold punishment.

Having escaped punishment by a thread, I, having seen the result, used the money that would have been spent on Reki's free meal to buy fish sausages for Haimaki.

I ripped off the packaging, giving them to Haimaki, who was waiting at the door obediently...Ooh. He wagged his tail furiously, gulping it down.

He looks pretty happy. So, he likes eating fish sausages? That's

something to take note of.

Accompanying me, Reki, whose appearance, for some reason, hadn't changed at all, although she had just eaten a gigantic pot of ramen, and I boarded the light rail, returning to Academy Island. We had just stepped onto the platform when another gust of strong wind blew.

Out of hand, I'll tell everybody this. As long as it is a Butei registered Butei dog, then it can ride trains, buses and other forms of public transportation. I can't be sure if the same applies for wolves, though.

On the desolate platform, *Fuah*--

Reki's skirt was blown upwards by the wind again, and I violently twisted my head to the side.

Hey...Can't you use your hand to hold it down, or maybe just turn such that you're in a safe direction? You're a girl, you know!

Because this robot girl, who had shown no signs of being humanized, was dangerous, in terms of Hysteria Mode, I made her walk in front...

Reki, Haimaki, and I formed a line, with Reki in front of me, and Haimaki behind me. As we walked down the stairs, *Tap*.

Reki suddenly stood still.

That gaze was fixated upon something that appeared to have flickered on the platform of the stairs we were descending--the shadow of some unknown person.

"...?"

Nearly colliding with Reki, I slowed down, surprised--*Thud*

But, Haimaki, following me from behind, smashed into the back of my knee, forcing it to buckle violently.

Which is to say, a situation of multiple collisions.

"...Oh..."

No way of stopping myself, I charged down the platform helplessly, as if pushing Reki, who had turned around, down.

Under the force of my shove, Reki too fell down the stairs...

Thud...My back smashed into the wall midway up the stairs.

Because my face appeared to be pressed against Reki's head, I had been saved from a concussion.

...Phew.

And just having letting out a sigh, taking a deep breath, I--

-couldn't help but widen my eyes in shock, having deeply inhaled Reki's mint-like scent.

"--!"

Th-the position right now...

I-It's too dangerous, isn't it!? This?

...I am one head taller than Reki.

And as such, my face was buried in Reki's hair, without so much as a word of consent--

I thrust my head away hurriedly, only to see Reki's gem-like irises gaze upon me from an extremely close distance, confirming my safety.

"...!"

And my hand--

-Just now, reflexively, for the sake of preventing from falling, was grabbing her slender shoulders, as if I was embracing them.

Because of this, Reki's body was leaning forward slightly...

Th-this...isn't this...

Exactly like an intimate couple, taking advantage of the shadows and the lack of people!?

And, hadn't I pushed Reki violently just now, making it appear as if I wanted to do something...!?

If it was Aria, at that moment, I would definitely be on the receiving end of a flying high-kick, hurtling back onto the platform. But, Reki was letting herself be embraced, not putting up any sort of resistance.

Reki's soft, slender shoulders were completely in my grasp.

That face, as beautiful as a carving, was directly in front of my eyes.

And those pink lips were only a few centimeters from mine--

(...Hysteria, Mode...!)

That single word invading my panicked mind, I checked my blood flow, extremely agitated.

It's OK...? Isn't this dangerous...!?

Ah, ah...? It's alright.

What a relief. I may not know why, but I hadn't transformed into Hysteria Mode.

Meeting Reki's gaze, I sighed discreetly...

--*Pata*

Suddenly, something fell on the mid-portion of the stairs, sending out a sound.

A position roughly five meters on my left.

I turned my head, looking towards the source of the noise, looking down the stairs...

A crepe.

...Fallen on the floor.

That crepe, cream and some sort of bean stuffing--was visible from a part which was half bitten off--curled up into a peach shaped, completely white bun.

Which is to say, that's a miniature peach bun, right?

Peach bun crepe, huh?

There really are many different types of crepes in this world.

And, someone who's willing to eat something so distasteful must be someone who loves peach buns.

--It must be--

It must be!?

"--!"

My heart jumping into my throat, I lightly...turned my gaze...

Towards the shoe of the person who had dropped that peach bun...a slender ankle, wearing a black sock...continuing to look up....over there...

"......!"

Frozen in a position of walking while eating peach bun crepes, I thought that she had been petrified...Kanzaki H. Aria was there!

Those big eyes were opened wide, completely fixated upon the scene where I had pushed Reki to the wall, embracing her.

And Aria, apparently trying to reboot her brain, which had crashed upon seeing this 'Terrible Scene', had entered stone-mode.

"......!"

And, the same went for me.

Why, in this kind of place--were we seen by Aria? As expected of me, guaranteed to be followed by misfortune.

Aria, I, and Reki, who had been completely still the whole time.

As if in a portrait, the three of us stood still, stood silent--

"But, but, but...is it true that there is a JC that can match Aria in Aru＝Kata?"

As she spoke, the sides of her mouth were smeared with cream as she ate a strawberry crepe...Inquesta's Mine Riko mounted the stairs.

And--she noticed Reki and I.

"UWWOOOOOOOOMUGUMUGUOAH--!?"

Her hair, fluttering on both sides of her head, flew upwards. Completely shocked.

...But, you know, you're still using both your hands to stuff what remains of the crepe in your mouth while you're in that shocked state. Right now.

"We-well done, Ki-kun! Despite the fact that Rekyu is an amazingly difficult character route that can't be unlocked until your second playthrough! You're already in the midst of a fiery, passionate kiss! Zgyun! Don! Don!"

Abnormally excited, Riko stuck her hands into her blouse, making what appeared to be punching movements from inside. What kind of movement is that?

And also, by Rekyu, do you mean Reki? As always, you don't hesitate or feel the slightest bit of apprehension when giving someone a nickname--as I was thinking that, Riko's antics could be said to have helped, as I felt myself relax a little.

As I realized that I was no longer in a frozen state, *Thud! Clank!*

Shouting "Don!" and messing around, Riko twirled into Aria, their legs nearly going vertical, they fell onto the floor violently.

Apparently freed from her frozen state as well, Aria, *Thud!*, jumped to her feet--

--Onigawara! With that kind of face, she glared this way.

Sc-scary!

"Ari--"

"That's enough!"

Uu! Baring her canines, Aria brought her arms down violently, cutting me short. She didn't give me any chance to explain.

"You, yo-yo, you've said enough! I knew that Idiot Kinji was somebody like this! That's right, that's right! You, yo-you! Lo-love, you love these kinds of quiet, re-reserved, beautiful people. Ju-just like Sh-Shi-Shirayuki!"

--Wh-why is she bringing up Shirayuki at a time like this!?

Below me, Aria averted her gaze from my face, which was twisted up in protest--

"A-and with her, yo-you, with her, with that kind of..." ....*Sniff, sniff*..."--I-I'm sorry! That's why, it's enough! Just shut up!"

As if she had nothing to say, she swallowed her words, *Pa!*

Glaring at me, frozen again.

"Besides that--Reki!"

Whoosh!

Aria bared her canines, pointing at Reki.

"You..really did it, didn't you...!? I saw it on the school-net website! You, without even refusing my offer...submitted an application to have a two-man team with Kinji...!"

What...?

Reki...already submitted an application to be in a two-man team with me?

I never heard about this beforehand...

"--That's 'Team Stealing'! An infraction which should be punished with holes!"

Facing the furious Aria--

Reki did not respond.

In Butei High, although 'Team Formation' is normally done in the latter part of September--according to the rules set down after Caravan I. However, in reality, students will form rough teams far before the actual event.

But...especially for Aria and I, students who are partners, one of us registering to be a member of another team is taboo.

And it appears...that that is exactly what Reki did.

"I--as for the ro-romance between Kinji and Reki, that kind of thing...I do-don't care at all! It's true, it's true, I really--don't care! It's true, so...! So, I don't care about the relationship between you two! I don't care, I don't care! It's not something I care about! But--I won't forgive you for stealing my partner! I'm the one that's tuning Kinji!"

Tuning?

Could you please stop that way of speaking...Can't you see that Riko's eyes are sparkling again?

Having been forced to shut up, I protested ineffectually, in my heart.

"Aria--"

Beside me, Reki said that, completely toneless. But, that voice made me feel as if she had an abnormal resolve.

"--What are you to Kinji-san?"

Ah...

That tone...this isn't good. Things are about to get messy.

I don't know why, but that sentence from just now seemed to raise an atmosphere, full of tension, as if it was a 'Declaration of War'.

"Wh-wh-wh...wh, what, what, wh-what, what did you say...th-that's..!"

I'm not sure if she understood Reki's words, but Aria, her hands trembilng, pointed at me.

"No-nothing. That thing is just my partne--idiot!"

Hey, Aria.

You know, nobody could understand your overexcited words from just now. Your eyes are spinning. Well, you probably wanted to say, "That thing is an idiot," anyways.

"--I am Kinji-san's fiancé."

Reki answered directly.

Riko immediately gasped with shock, going "Fuooahhh!" Aria seemed like she had been shot in the stomach, and with an "Uu!", she doubled over.

"High...Getting engaged in high school..."

Shh, Shhhh

Seeming as if...she was carrying some sort of deep understanding in her eyes, Aria glanced to the side, lifting her torso.

"That...is just playing pretend...!"

An overwhelming feeling that she was doing her best was radiating off Aria.

Even though I'm not sure what she's doing her best at.

"--This is not a game. This is serious. Aria-san. I hope that you can stay away from Kinji-san from now on. After this, Kinji...will stay in my room, just like last night. He will stay with me throughout the day, and we shall sleep together at night."

"Serious" "Stay in my room, just like last night" "Sleep together". Under the continuous barrage of Reki's words, Aria's expressions flickered through "Awaa!" "Stop it!" "Please stop!" one by one.

Hey, Reki...Stop saying things that can be misunderstood so easily!

Aria's already thinking some weird thoughts, and her face is turning all red!

"I understand, Aria-san and Kinji-san trust each other."

Reki continued to speak, as if she was following through with her furious assault,

"--But, that is not love."

"Lo, lo, lo-lo-lo-lo-lo...!?"

Shouting with a voice like that of a chicken, Aria had entered a mode where she could not say the syllable, 「し」.[5]

No, it's fine if you don't say it. Don't say it.

If you're going to react this way to all of Reki's denpa words, this

will never end.

"Lo-lo-lo-lo-lo-lo----Kinji!"

As if forcing herself to ignore Reki's words, she glared at me with a face of a demon.

"Wh-what are you going to do! Are you going to--be in a group with Reki!? Is that your plan!?"

Not letting me say a word, calling me an idiot, always throwing a tantrum like a kid, I--under the accumulated pressure of Reki, Team Formation, the exchange student,

-went "Hmmph," pursing my lips.

No...

Wrong. It's not only that. Actually...

"--That kind of thing has nothing to do with you, right?"

What did I say--?

Something akin to pouring oil on a fire.

"In the first place, I'm preparing to withdraw from Butei High next year. Teams, partners, whatever, those things don't matter to me at all. Also, once--"

Kanae-san's trial is over, you're going to go back to London.

But, this shouldn't be something that I should say in front of Reki and Riko.

And, no matter what...

I was not willing to say it.

I was not willing to utter those words. Not willing to confirm the reality of Aria's approaching farewell.

I did not know why, nor had I any wish to know why.

"Aria. So what if I'm in a team with you? That kind of team, about to split and part their own ways, is meaningless."

"Wrong! Even if they're apart, a team is a team! As long as it's registered in IADA, they can help each other without restrictions, for eternity! Even if they're scattered, the proof of their companionship will remain for all eternity--"

"Whether or not that kind of thing remains, matters not the slightest to me!"

I could not help but raise my voice.

Aria.

Since you're about to disappear from my side--

I will not agree to something like 'making memories'.

As such, you can return to your home country with no regrets. Tokyo and London are on opposite sides of the Earth. As such, there is no way that we will be able to help each other.

You are going to disappear. From my side.

Since that is the case, do not try to leave any lingering memories.

"It doesn't really matter, does it? Fighting together with you was a thing of the past. Now--"

Saying this, I halted my words.

Because--

-With heavy footsteps, as if kicking her feet into the ground, Aria walked towards me.

"~~~

As I tensed my body in reflex, about to be struck by Aria...

Shh--Reki came between us.

--*Pa!*

"--!"

Aria, Riko, and I. Everybody widened their eyes in shock.

Reki--

-struck Aria across the face.

--*Shhh*

Under this sudden assault, immediately going into counter mode, Aria--

-retreated, jumping backwards, bumping into Riko, who had just turned back, *Thud*.

Landing on the ground heavily.

"...Kinji-san. Please retreat, this place is dangerous."

Reki, her tone as normal, stood in front of me.

"...!"

Having had her partner stolen by Reki, who she considered her friend, and being treated like a dangerous object, Aria...lowered her hand, which had been rubbing her face--

"...Nothing matters anymore..."

Her eyes, hidden in the shadow of her fringe, and unsteadily...she stood up.

"Reki...How coincidental. Today is the day of 'Water Tossing'. We can use unarmed combat...we can go all out--"

Aria brought her arms close, assuming a fighting stance.

It was full of aggressiveness, almost as if she was a tiger intimidating her prey.

Sh-she really wants to fight.

"Added to that, earlier, an exchange student broke the rules, and as we were passing by, she initiated Aru＝Kata! In the end, there was no clear victory, and she ran away...Right now, I'm in a really bad mood...!"

An exchange student able to match Aria in Aru＝Kata!?

"A-Aria...was that exchange student someone who called herself "The Warrior of Ten-thousand techniques"...How do I say this...someone that looked like you?"

Thinking back to the time where I had nearly been killed by Koko, I asked, agitated--

"Shut up! And, I'm not that small!"

--Isn't that obviously a denial?

Was Aria also attacked by that exchange student from Hong Kong, Koko?

Then, in that light...not only is she a martial artist, but she's also an expert that can even match Aria in marksmanship?

U-unbelievable. That is completely unbelievable.

"--Riko, Get my back."

Aria, raised her head, speaking to Riko, who was at her back.

Only to see that Haimaki had circled to the other side of the platform at some point in time.

He had moved to a location where he could catch the two Quadras--Aria and Riko, between Reki and himself, in a pincer-like

movement.

I see. The reason Riko turned back was because she had noticed him.

Grrrrrrr...Riko, standing in front of Haimaki, who was growling like that,

"--Kufufu. Riko is a kitty lover, but Riko likes dogs too, you know."

Turning her head slightly, she let loose a vicious smile, full of battle fervor.

Riko's unarmed combat, huh? Now that I think about it, this is the first time I had seen her fight like this--

"Kufu!"

Laughing happily, Riko moved into a stance, her right hand above, her left hand below.

Afterwards, she bent her knees at right angles, *Thud!*

Her left leg kicked out towards Haimaki, threatening him.

That is--Kung Fu. That's unexpected.

And what's more, it's the style most commonly seen in Hong Kong movies, Eight Trigrams Palm.

This is a style that was separated into many schools, and the variations of the technique in this stance were one of many.

"..."

And Reki was standing there, completely unafraid of Aria's intimidation.

Amazing. That bravery.

(But...)

I frowned.

Because Reki...didn't assume a stance.

She was just staring straight at Aria.

"..."

Pa! Facing Aria, who had pounced like a tiger--

Reki didn't resist at all--*Thud*

Like a flower, carelessly plucked off its stem, she was knocked down with ease. She didn't even defend herself.

Groar!

As if trying to help Reki, Haimaki bounded over--but his tail was caught by Riko.

"Ahaha! Rekyu! Riko will be taking this child! Riko will take this fur!"[6]

Bch! Sweeping Haimaki off his back legs with a leg sweep, Riko--

-Haimaki, turning to look at her, swung his front paw, tracing an arc in the air towards her *Bch!*

Swinging her right hand in a huge circle, she deflected the paw, forcing him to sprawl out onto the ground.

And, *Thud!* Jumping onto his back, she completely sealed off his movements.

"...!"

On the other side, sitting down on Reki, who was lying face-up, Aria--

-her eyes widened, she was staring down at Reki, who hadn't resisted...No, couldn't resist would be more accurate.

I too was shocked.

(...Reki can't fight unarmed...!?)

It's not that Reki 'had no stance'.

She 'did not know' what a stance was.

In the first place, as a sniper, she's an expert at ranged warfare.

There's no chance that she would intentionally move close to the enemy.

So, unarmed combat isn't a mandatory class in Snipe, and Reki's movements completely exposed the fact that she was a complete amateur.

"Aria, stop it! You're just picking on the weak!"

I shouted.

But, Aria's fist, raised high up in the air, turned towards Reki, who had been knocked down as easily as a normal high school student...was not put down.

As if trying to contain her own rage, which was threatening to overflow, she gritted her teeth.

"~~~~~~~~~!"

She couldn't bring herself to let the blow fall. Reki was too weak. No, that was not the only reason. Aria doesn't wish to hit Reki. Because, she has always recognized Reki as her friend.

Aria--different from me, who intentionally tries to stay aloof and away from society--cannot make friends.

That may be because of her maverick-like personality, but it's also because her strength is too amazing, making it hard for the students around her to keep up.

And only Reki--although her special study is different--could fit her.

During the bus-jacking in April, she had helped too, and when Aria left home because of the fight about Shirayuki, the person she went to was Reki as well.

So, she couldn't bring herself to hit Reki--

--*Shh!*

At that moment, Aria suddenly bent backwards, dodging a flash of silver. Leaping backwards and turning a flip, she distanced herself from Reki.

Shh...

From Aria's twin-tails, which had just been grazed by a bayonet--

One strand, two strands of hair, just cut, floated into the air.

"...Reki...Hey...!"

Reki had drawn the bayonet hidden beneath her skirt.

On the day of Water Tossing, unarmed combat is the only thing that is allowed with no holds barred...!

".....!"

Reki brushed the Dragunov off her shoulder, *Shhh--Click!*

Like a parade baton, she rolled the gun around, affixing the bayonet onto it.

Reki lowered her stance, wielding the Dragunov, which has been assembled in an instant.

That stance--it's an ancient bayonet technique, but it's quite effective.

It's probably about twice the power of just now.

"Reki...!"

Seeing Reki, who was ignoring Water Tossing's rules, Aria hesitated, undecided on whether she too should draw her blades--

Tap--!

Taking advantage of that momentary opening, Reki charged towards Aria, *Kch!*

She feinted at Aria's thigh, forcing Aria to dodge backwards--

"--!"

Kch! Kch Kch!

With terrifying grace, the bayonet slashed towards Aria without pause. The targets were, wrist, abdomen, inner thigh. It did not deviate from this pattern, and the blade, as if drawn by an inexorable gravity, continued to pierce towards Aria's vitals.

Aria was relying on her prodigious reflexes and athletic ability, evading the bayonet's assault--but in the end, she had been chased to the wall.

"--!"

And, Aria's neck as her target--Reki performed the sharpest stab yet!

Kcch!!

Aria dodged the blade, her neck a hair's breadth from the blade.

And the bayonet continued, brushing past Aria's head, burying itself deep into the wall.

"...!"

This blow made Aria widen her camellia eyes in shock.

I too had lost all ability to speak.

Sealing Haimaki's movements, Riko had also opened her mouth wide, dazed, just like a manga character.

Th-that was--really filled with killing intent.

Zcch Drawing the bayonet out of the wall, *Shhh*, spinning the Dragunov and retreating a few steps, Reki--just as fast as she had closed in, she retreated.--And once again, she assumed that stance.

The edge of that blade was still pointing directly at Aria's neck.

Shh Just as Reki took a step, charging forward--

"Reki! Stop!"

Finally able to take this opportunity to speak, I shouted.

And...*Pa*

Reki became still, just like a robot, which had the cancel button on its remote pressed.

Afterward...*Spin*

Twirling the Dragunov wordlessly--her gaze still on Aria, she shouldered the rifle.

"Reki..."

Aria--

Attacked like this by Reki, who she had thought of as a friend--

"You...you..."

...Tears appeared in her eyes.

"I'm cutting all ties with you! Severing them! I will never--forgive you again! I never want to see your face again!"

Facing Reki, who was still silent, still staring at herself, Aria shouted before running away. Riko followed her.

So, just Reki and I, as well as Haimaki, were left at the station.

I...dragged Reki along, who was like a robot that had been switched off, ever since I issued the order to stop. With quick steps, I went to one of the corners of Academy Island--The artificial island's border.

We arrived at the seaside, completely devoid of life, surrounded on all sides by safety nets.

Here...I wanted to teach Reki something.

Because, those extreme actions from just now had exceeded anything my humanization plan could have possibly taken care of.

Reki sat upright at the edge of the sea, not looking in my direction.

Just, how do I put this...it looks like she's calm again.

I could feel a sense of calm radiating off her even as she battled, so saying that she's calmed down is a little strange.

"...Reki."

"Yes."

"Earlier, you wanted to kill Aria."

"Yes."

She answered me directly.

No resistance.

"Yes...you say. Why?"

"--The 'wind' ordered me to do so. It said that Kinji-san and Aria-san could not stay close."

...Wind.

That again.

This girl...she said the same thing on the night that she placed Sniper Restriction upon me. It was all because of the 'wind's' orders.

"What is this 'wind'? Could it be that that's what you're listening to with your headphones? Before, you said that you were listening to the sound of the wind."

"--Incorrect. This is just a recording of the wind of my birthplace.."

"Wind of your birthplace?...?"

"For the sake of keeping my soul in contact with the wind, I listen to it."

...This is becoming increasingly incomprehensible.

"Then, is it somebody speaking to you over the phone?"

"Incorrect."

"Then, how do you receive the orders of the wind?"

"The wind's words are projected directly into my head. From my faraway birthplace--"

...

.....

Uh...

I don't want to speak ill of anybody...

But, no matter how I look at it, Reki has a social disorder--

In other words, she has the disease which is 'delusion'.

This is something I learned in Inquesta, 'I have received a prophecy from God', or 'Aliens ordered me to do this through electric waves'. Those kinds of delusions. What Reki has right now is very similar to such a thing.

But, I had also learned that one could not deny those things outright.

Because, the people in question trust those delusions with all their heart.

And...I am not a doctor.

Attempting to find a solution is futile.

First, let's leave this topic, and I'll deliver those words I want to speak to her concisely.

"Um...that. Saying this kind of thing is a little...But, don't kill people."

"Why?"

Wh...

Why, you ask?

"Why? Things that cannot be done just cannot be done. Don't kill."

"Is that an order?"

"It is. That is what is decided in Butei Law."

"I understand. Then, I will not kill."

Why is it that...

Why is it that I feel that the words I'm hearing mean that she has killed before.

Well, I won't delve into that. It's a scary thought.

(But...)

Calming down, I thought about it. I thought about Lima Syndrome, which I was using against this delusional, robot girl--

--Can I really do it?

If I have to do it like this, all by myself...it doesn't seem as if that will ever come to pass.

Then, I have to find people to help.

Thinking about this, I--

-glanced at Reki, who was hugging her knees to herself and watching the seagulls, out of the corner of my eye. I sighed.

And...that fight from just now...

Reki may be in the wrong, but Aria isn't right either.

She didn't even listen to our side of the story.

Relying on the pieces of the puzzle that she gathered from seeing the situation, she put them together herself, and formulated a misunderstanding.

That really completely exposes her weak point.

Her instincts when fighting with the enemy are amazingly acute--but she has the bad habit of always reaching an incorrect conclusion, and acting upon that flawed basis when I'm involved.

Originally, after leaning on each other throughout the many battles with I-U, the slight feeling I had that she was a good person...disappeared.

Aria is a haughty, arbitrary, violent girl, after all.

3rd Ammo: Caravan I -Field Trip-

Amdo's educational building is made up of 1 level above ground, and 3 levels below ground, with the levels underground wider than the level on top.

'Underground'. For Academy Island, which is an artificial island, that certainly is a curious phrase.

Passing through the rigorous checks on the first floor and continuing underground...I arrived at a corridor that was filled with display cases filled with an innumerable amount of guns.

This place...this is an empty space that makes me nervous no matter when I come.

With Reki and Haimaki, who were following me, I passed through the corridor, ringing the doorbell of Workroom B201, which was adorned with a plaque which had "Hiraga Aya" written on it--

"I'm in! The door's unlocked!"

From inside, Hiraga-san's childlike voice reached my ears.

I opened the door, noticing that the inside seemed to be a temple devoted to Don Quixote, as there were things, things, and more things everywhere.

Tools of all sizes, components of guns from every era...springs, wrenches, the hundreds of screws in plastic cases, they were all mixed about, stacked until they reached the ceiling.

"Hiraga-san, it's me. Tohyama."

I shuffled sideways, taking care not to touch what had already become a forest of components, walking inside.

The workbench that was situated within the room had a DVD player and a TV, which was broadcasting a shoujo anime on it.

Beside it--*KCCCHHH!* Having been welding something, Hiraga-san twisted her head towards me.

"Oohh!? Tohyama-kun brought Reki-san with him! You guys are getting along well!"

Shunting the protective goggles upwards, Hiraga-san used those innocent eyes to look between Reki and me.

"This is...I didn't bring her, she followed me herself. Also...Is it completed?"

I looked around, asking.

"Yeah, you guys are getting along well! You two really match!"

Said Hiraga-san, pointing two fingers at Reki and me.

"No, that isn't how this is..."

"Aha! You're getting along well!!"

...Is that all you can say?

"No we're not. What I'm asking is, is the object I contracted you for completed?"[7]

Hearing me ask again, the lightbulb above Hiraga-san's head flickered on.

"Aha! The contract is finished too! It's finished!"

Saying this, she went deeper into the tool rack...*Kcch*. Just like a squirrel entering a tree, she stuck her head and torso within.

It looks like, if she doesn't do that, she can't reach it.

"Uuu! Just a little bit more!"

Her SSS-sized uniform snagged by a nail on a shelf, Hiraga-san, only her bottom half visible, wriggled her hips, twisting them around, and those legs, as thin as an elementary school student's, were also struggling.

...It's amazing that you can remember where it is, at least.

Well, Hiraga-san is a genius girl, which even U.S. arms manufacturers scouted because of her talent after all. The structure of her brain is, most likely, slightly different from normal.

...*Kch, Kccch*

Ah, she came out.

"This may be a western blade, but it is a masterpiece that is no worse than the best of Japanese katanas. Tohyama-kun really has something good!"

Screws and springs stuck inside her hair, Hiraga-san, *Shh*

Handed over a double-edged sword which had a body which seemed to glow with a fierce light.

Ooh. It's been completely modernized.

What I had just received was the scramasax that Sherlock had used in I-U.

At the end of the battle, I borrowed this to mount the ICBM...but because of its unnatural sharpness, I had been keeping it up till now. What I had contracted Hiraga-san to construct was something fitted for me, a reinforced rubber handle as well as a hidden sheath--

I placed it in the sheath behind my back. Yeah, it's completely hidden. As expected of Hiraga-san.

"Also, I also modified this, as you requested me to. I accelerated the speed of magazine release, added a three burst-fire setting, as well as full auto!"

This time, Hiraga-san used those small hands to hand over a gun.

Click This heavy, large pistol is--a Desert Eagle.

It is one of the world's most powerful semi-automatic pistols, my father's legacy.

Reki glanced towards the pitch-black body.

"The only person in Amdo able to modify it to such a level is Aya! Amazing, right!?"

Said Hiraga-san, thrusting forward her flat chest, no different from Aria's, with pride.

I raised the gun, aiming it towards the wall. In the sight, Jeanne, Vlad, Patra, Sherlock--the appearances of all the superhumans that we had fought till now appeared.

...Regretfully, I'm still a Butei High student.

I-U, as a group, may have splintered, but its remnants are still on the run. So, it's practically certain that one of those ability users, just like in manga, will attack.

And, for the sake of resisting, of course I strengthen my equipment.

Following this line of thought, I found this Desert Eagle from out of my the things my father left behind.

The bullets that this Desert Eagle uses are bullets that have three times the stopping power of the 9mm parabellum ammo that my Beretta uses, a .50AE.

However, guns...aren't like in games, where once they are equipped, they increase the user's power. To put it simply, the user has to undergo training for such a thing to happen.

Especially this Desert Eagle, whose barrel and recoil are both abnormally strong.

My father, who was a strong man, nearly 2 meters in height, could

use it freely, but for me, it's a gun that is too heavy, and too powerful. If I want to be able to use it without impediment, I have to undergo more practice.

And as such, I temporarily--decided only to use it when I was in Hysteria Mode.

After all, even if I have a powerful gun, it's meaningless if I can't hit the target.

I sheathed the gun, slipping it into the holster that Hiraga-san had provided--one that was strapped to one's thigh.

Beside me, Hiraga-san's round eyes were glowing with an innocent light, and she looked up at me, saying

"Mmm, Tohyama-kun is really cool like this! A black Desert Eagle really fits a dark boy like you!"

Dark boy?

"Isn't that right, Reki-san!"

....*Shh*

Reki nodded her head in agreement.

"Reki-san, remember to buy the components for your armor-piercing bullets. I've already prepared amazing bullet tips, made out of reinforced tungsten carbide. Thanks for the patronage♪"

Her hands put together, brought up, touching her face, Hiraga-san flashed a large, salesman-like, smile.

Shh

Apparently also one of Hiraga-san's old customers, Reki nodded.

...Selling weapons to me as well as selling weapons to Reki, it looks like, the more we fight...the richer Hiraga-san becomes. And, she herself doesn't have to fight. Arms dealing, it's such a profitable job.

Her face may be innocent, but she's a terrifying person. Hiraga-san, that is.

A few days after I started to live with Reki--The Reki humanization plan that I had prepared for the sake of the Lima Syndrome received a small opportunity.

That day, we had swimming class, but Ranbyou-sensei, whose blind date appeared to have failed again, vented the full force of her rage upon the boys of class B, destroying the swimming pool. It was hard for me to imagine a lone person destroying a swimming pool with her bare hands, but ultimately, this is only something that the Vice-Director of Assault, the monstrously strong woman, Ranbyou, could do.

Repairing the swimming pool would take some time...so the swimming class that the girls in class C were going to have was pushed back till after school.

And after school--I didn't want it to look like I was peeping, but I still observed the swimming pool--I noticed that Reki, also wearing the school swimsuit, was standing with the other girls by the edge of the pool.

(This means that I can temporarily move freely...!)

I immediately put my body into gear, burdened by one extra sword and gun--using the fish sausages as a lure, I locked Haimaki in the sports warehouse before running to the rendezvous point with the person that was going to aid me in my plan.

I arrived at a point close to the center of Academy Island--the tennis court by the second field.

Bch. Bch. Shh.

...Inside the fence, wearing white tennis outfits, the girls in the tennis club were sweating profusely.

Ignoring what they're like normally, in this kind of situation, they're fulfilling their time of youth, of vigor.

But, opposed to them, pressing himself into the fence, was someone, looking exactly like a prison inmate. Probably for the crime of peeping.

Ah! Jeanne-san!

I looked towards one side of the court, towards where the freshmen girls were shouting, and over there--*Shh!*

Strands of hair hanging on each of her cheeks, the rest tied up with a ponytail, Jeanne delivered a sharp smash, currently in a furious match with a curly-haired member of the tennis club.

(Hey, that...)

Just now, I thought that I had seen it.

Jeanne's tennis-wear--

That skirt, following in the wake of Jeanne's killer smash, had floated upwards.

Bch, Whoosh--

And every time she swung her racket...

Her pure white triple-layered, frilly underskirt would, for an instant, be completely exposed.

No. I understand. That isn't underwear. It's just sportswear, it doesn't matter even if anyone sees it.

What I had thought I saw was just a mistake my brain had made, unable to tell the difference.

But...that underskirt, almost like underwear, wasn't the only problem.

Having long, graceful legs which a Japanese person would be hard pressed to have, (well, now that I think about it, she isn't Japanese,) her thighs were full, and delightfully supple. Also, they were amazingly white, almost like snow.

Every time her skirt flipped up, those were exhibited for all to see, so the stimulation of arousal was hardly normal. This is too dangerous, right?

Damn it. Why is it that the girls' tennis outfit is designed such that it appears to be showing off their lower body? To the designer: Get the hell out here! I wouldn't mind using my sword to help fix your broken mind.

...Actually, now that I think about it, doesn't it really look like I'm peeking?

I just came here to find Jeanne...

For the sake of preventing any suspicion that I would be doing such a thing, I dropped my head, and as I fought an inner battle with Hysteria Mode, which was threatening to activate...the sound of the match stopped.

I jerked my head up, only to see a freshman kouhai shouting, "Please use this towel!", running towards Jeanne, who appeared to have achieved a landslide victory.

...Jeanne, you're pretty popular, aren't you. Even if among the female students. I may not know why, but it seems that she's a beautiful person that's just as attractive to girls.

With such splendor, she was received in a manner befitting a princess.

--In the time since the Plea Bargain that allowed her to transfer from I-U to Butei High, Jeanne had already enrolled in Informa, joined the tennis club, and like now, she was living a fulfilling high school life.

And opposed to that, having been defeated by her in the underground warehouse last spring, I...am being restricted by a robot girl and a wolf.. What have I gotten myself into?

Not able to avoid spiraling into deep depression, I--

"--Tohyama."

Heard Jeanne, who had finally noticed my presence.

"Jeanne, come, quickly."

I waved towards her.

Her silver hair partitioned, hanging down her back, she had changed into her uniform, striding out of the clubroom for the tennis club...

At a distance around 2 meters away, *Tap*, she stood her ground.

"Don't come any closer. Tohyama."

"Why?"

"In the club activities just now, I sweated a little."

Said Jeanne, shifting the racket that was slung over her back, under her shoulder.

"But, because of your haste, I did not have time to shower. As such, I only used a wet towel to wipe my body, and perfume to mask my scent."

...You're still so formal.

Also, did you say you used perfume? Even though you're still a high school student. As expected of the ojou-sama who holds the blood of nobles.

"There's no need to pay attention to that. Let's talk as we walk."

Fyuu A gust of wind blew past--and Jeanne's scent, a comfortable, grassy fragrance, wafted from her body.

Hey, you're not sweaty at all, are you?

Before, I had heard Nii-san...No, I should say Kana...say that just relying on perfume wasn't fully effective, and that only when perfume is mixed and melded perfectly with a woman's natural scent, will it be able to create a pleasing, moving fragrance.

And the Jeanne as of now had completely achieved this.

In Butei High, which is full of the acrid stink of gunpowder, you really are an unparalleled, fresh existence.

Jeanne frowned, a little hesitant--but she walked this way, keeping by my side.

Glancing at her, who was walking beside me, that skirt, following the school rules perfectly, was hiding a gun.

--A CZ100, huh? That's a good gun.

"The fact that Aria and you separated and that you're in a team with Reki now--has become quite big news in Inquesta."

"You're kidding me...Somebody like me isn't qualified to be a topic of discussion, right?"

"Tohyama, you yourself may not know this, but the students in

Butei High, especially those in Assault, believe that you have excellent abilities in battle, and from the shadows, they respect and admire you. However, they're afraid of your reaction, so they aren't too open with their admiration. To tell the truth, after hearing about your induction exam, I looked at you in a new light."

Ha-have mercy on me.

And, up till now, whether it is a good or bad thing I'm not sure of, but I'm still looked up to by those in Assault.

"This is also written in the reports that Masters keeps. They said that, while there are some ups and downs with your status, you possess the greatest alternative power, your charisma, your leadership--you just lack integration with others, and there are some issues with your personality."

Issues with my personality, huh?

How troublesome.

"Mmm, well...there's no need to talk about me. Rather, let's speak about Reki. What have you found out?"

I thought about what Aria had said from back then--A battle between Butei is a battle of information.

What kind of opponent the enemy is, what are his weaknesses, what does he like, what does he hate...the first side able to grasp these characteristics has an overwhelming advantage.

But, if one acts by himself, he will be noticed immediately, and as such, contracting a third party is common practice.

The person that I had contracted in April was Riko from Inquesta, and the person that I had contracted this time was Jeanne, who had taught Riko how to sift through information. After all, the teacher should be better than the student, and jokes and false information tend to appear in Riko's reports.

"Elite snipers will often try to hide information about themselves, and Reki has this tendency as well. As such, the amount of

information that exists about her is extremely limited."

Well, that's what I expected.

Even living together with her, I hadn't really figured anything out about her.

"Also, her past history is a blank. The success rate of missions after entering Butei High is 100%, an impeccable record. But, she is extremely selective with her missions."

"What does that mean?"

"Presently, all I can say is, Reki only accepts a mission under three patterns."

"Three patterns...?"

"The first, a teacher asks her directly to do so. Under certain, rare circumstances, Masters will assign the contract to specific, excellent students...although these cannot be solved outright because of special conditions, it is possible to earn a large amount of credits, nullifying the need to take an exam. You ran into something like this during your first year, right?"

Now that she mentions it...when I was in Assault, such a thing did happen.

I thought back to that situation, and thinking of buying a can of coffee, I slotted a coin into a roadside vending machine.

"--the second, missions with an LD Score of over 900"

"900...!?"

Shocked, my hand slammed into a button on the vending machine.

LD Score is a ranking system, assessing the difficulty of a Butei mission. I don't normally pay attention to it, but special, outside organizations will use the value as an evaluator for the compensation.

300~400 are commissions meant for student Butei, 500~700 are commissions meant for professional Butei, and that is basically how it's divided.

--But, above 900.

In even elite Butei organizations, they are missions that only the best of the best would ever dare accept.

"Ah...I was so surprised that I pushed the button for hot."

Yet, it's amazingly hot right now...So unlucky.

Grumbling, I took the black coffee out, and Jeanne, standing by my side, took it from my hands.

"...Recently, my magic hasn't been very stable. But, I can still do something like this."

Pa, the can of coffee that she threw back...had become cold.

Oh! The Diamond Dust Witch, Jeanne, can use her ability for something like this. How convenient.

"Reki...accepted several of those maximum difficulty sniping missions. And, speaking in light of the fact that she still has a 100% success rate, we can already determine that she is either an ability user or a sorcerer."

Despite the fact that she herself was an ability user and sorcerer, Jeanne still said those words with a look of awe.

"...You said that there were three patterns, right? What's the third?"

"It's 'Eagle Eye'."

"Eagle Eye...? Reki?"

This rather unexpected content made me tilt my head, not fully understanding.

The "Eagle Eye" in question is something that takes advantage of

snipers' prodigious eyesight to observe a target from far away--a codename for a reconnaissance mission.

That mission, where both the credit and money compensation isn't high, is such that, usually, only inexperienced freshmen or trainees in Snipe accepts it...

"Tohyama. You've been observed before. At least two times before."

"...What did you say?"

"The first time, the contractor was Aria. The date was April the 2nd. She contracted Reki to be her "Eagle Eye", so she could figure out which entrance you leave Inquesta from, and lie in wait."

Ah. That past incident, where we went to Oumi to look for that kitten.

At that time, thinking of how to combat Aria, I took a mission, trying to escape outside--but Aria, lying in wait outside the Inquesta building, appeared before me.

So, that was Reki, observing me from afar, reporting to Aria?

She really sticks her head where it's unwanted.

"And in July, she accepted a mission from Masters, the content being, observe the third boy's dormitory. At that time, Masters had apparently been warned by the police, being told to observe an empty room...since it's Butei High, they have to strengthen their alertness. And, Reki accepted that mission."

I remembered that too. That was the time where Shirayuki saw Aria in a bunny girl outfit, and she went trigger happy on her M60. At that time, Reki was using the Dragunov's scope to observe my room.

"And, the 'Eagle Eye' missions that Reki accepts all fall under certain criteria. Only when it involves you, Aria, or Shirayuki, will she accept."

"Aria, Shirayuki, or me...?"

What kind of pattern is that? I don't understand at all.

But, I understand a little now...from the beginning, Reki had been paying attention to what goes on around me.

And the only person who didn't know--was me?

"The first time I investigated, I found some other pieces of information, but many of those were unconfirmed. This is all that can be reported. Alright--did you gather anything yourself?"

A few days ago, after Reki and Aria's battle...I had explained my situation under Reki's Sniper Restriction, as well as Lima Syndrome, which was my adopted plan of action, asking Jeanne for assistance...

At that time, Jeanne made one request: "As you're by Reki's side, give me a clue as to what I can investigate about her."

"What I have gathered is--sound."

"Sound?"

"Reki always wears earphones, hearing these mysterious sounds. Yesterday, I took advantage of the time she was in the shower, and borrowed her headphones and MP3 player...copying it into a micro-SD card."

"Shower...? What kind of scene is that? That you two have."

Jeanne said, flashing a look of suspicion towards me. I'll just ignore that.

I plugged my earphones into my phone, handing one side to Jeanne.

"Listen to this, see whether you can understand it."

"Mm..."

We stopped talking, each of us wearing one side, listening intently.

Before this, I had tried listening to the sounds...It was slightly eerie, but it really was just the sound of the wind, playing endlessly.

"..."

Because the cord was too short, our heads slowly approached each other as we listened...*Shh*. Jeanne's long, silver hair, fluttering in the midst of the wind, lightly brushed my cheek.

Uu. This feminine sensation is really hateful.

But, I'll have to tolerate it.

"--Here. It may be extremely small, but I heard a small sound. Not wind. But, I can't make it out..."

"Mm..."

Jeanne closed her eyes, her expression firm, completely concentrated on the sound.

Waiting to see for Jeanne to comment, I looked directly at her face.

...

.....

...Even so...she really is so beautiful. This girl.

Long eyelashes. A shining nose. Lips like the petals of a rose.

This cool image. Rather than a witch, she's more like an actress.

"I can't hear it. But, this is certainly a clue...Wh-what are you doing, Tohyama? Why are you looking at me?"

Widening those sapphire-like blue eyes halfway through her speech, Jeanne noticed that I was looking at her from an extremely close distance, and she pulled her head away.

"Ah, no, I was just waiting for your comments."

I said, taking off my headphones...and passed the micro-SD card

with the music file on it to Jeanne, waiting for her to speak.

Her face slightly red for whatever reason, Jeanne cleared her throat before saying,

"This might be a clue. I happen to know someone to go to."

Her arms folded in front of her chest, forefinger and middle finger stuck out, she gestured towards the SD-card in between them.

While using her own ice-blue cellphone to call that person she "happened to know", Jeanne brought me to see--Connect. Next to Informa, it's where students are taught to support those in the battlefield through the use of communicative devices.

Connect, huh...I've never really come here before.

"I get along quite well with the Nakasorachi here."

Hearing this uncommon surname, I suddenly remembered something.

--Nakasorachi Misaki.

A Connect sophomore, although we were in the same grade, I couldn't remember what she looked like, but...I was very familiar with that voice.

The reason I say that is because, very often, she acts as the operator during Assault combat.

Butei--especially the Butei in Assault, need to be able to communicate with each other through wireless headsets.

When undergoing a large-scale operation, the people that keep the complicated messages from getting jumbled, are the operators.

The operator assumes command from Connect, accurately stating the team's status to all its members. Often, they will also report the ETA of reinforcements, the change in weather, etc., informing them of information that Butei in the middle of the combat cannot find

out for themselves.

In the bus-jacking incident in April, telling us which bus was hijacked, as well as informing us of all the situational reports before the reinforcements took action--

-was the operator, Nakasorachi. Which is to say, she was one of the people working behind the scenes, absolutely critical to the resolution of that case.

Nakasorachi's operating is perfect. She is always amazingly calm, able to follow separate conversations with several Butei, all speaking with hurried, unclear voices at the same time. In spite of all that, she is able to pass on each and every piece of information accurately.

Even more worthy of praise is her elocution, her voice is just as clear, as pleasing to one's ear as that of an NHK anchor. I had never heard her wrong, not once.

(But, I remember that, although she is such an excellent Butei, she was only ranked as B.)

I had only heard her voice, so I did not know what she looked like in reality.

She's probably seen me before, through the small camera installed in every headset, but as for me, it was my first time seeing her.

I can't be wrong that she's a girl. She must be an honor student, radiating a graceful air.

Thinking of this, Jeanne, saying "Follow me", hurried me onwards--[8]

We walked into the Connect building, which was like a telecommunications corporation.

Under Jeanne's guidance, I arrived at the audio classroom, and it appeared that, for the sake of keeping dust outside, shoes were forbidden inside.

Changing into slippers and entering the room...because school was already over, the classroom was empty.

I looked left and right, and audio equipment was neatly stacked all around me, just like a radio station.

Jeanne and I stood a while, in the middle of this classroom, full of the scent of machinery...

"--Jeanne?"

Tap Tap Several types of headphones piled up in her arms, a girl ran this way from the side...but because she was carrying too many, it didn't seem as if she could see in front of her--

"He-hey."

Not hearing my warning in time, *Thud*

"Hawaa!"

She smashed into me...*Thump* Her butt hit the floor.

Whoosh A pair of silver-edged glasses flew into the air--and beside me, who had reached up, grabbing it, *Gcch Gcch*

The earphones that she was carrying spilled out onto the floor, while the tangled wires wrapped around her head, her arms, as well as her feet, which were wearing red indoor shoes.

"Haaa."

That girl's hair wasn't only long in the back, but in the front as well, nearly blocking out her eyes.

I remembered that the male protagonist in the galge that I had helped Riko buy, had this kind of hairstyle as well.

Could it be that that's what's popular nowadays?

(...Uu...)

--Because she had fallen down, she was at my feet, and her skirt,

terrifyingly enough, was in a mess.

If it was a normal guy, he'd probably be feeling quite lucky. But, that isn't me. I have to avert my gaze, looking upwards, making sure that there isn't the slightest chance that I somehow looked between those thighs. After all, safety first.

"Are you alright, Nakasorachi?"

Jeanne, next to me, asked.

Hmm?

She is...Nakasorachi...?

I couldn't help but widen my eyes, turning back towards that girl, who was still tangled because, for some reason, the wires were uncannily linked, and she couldn't get them off.

This...This is completely different from the way I imagined it.

Hearing her instructions, I really felt that she was an extremely adept person.

That girl, named Nakasorachi, extricated herself from the wires with Jeanne's help, and waving her hands in the air, she shouted "Glasses, glasses!" Almost like in a manga, like a dog chasing its own tail, she crawled around, tracing circles on the ground, feeling for her glasses. Are you alright?

...Which is to say, I can understand that she'd be wearing her uniform while crawling around like this...

Bu-but, those breasts...they're majestic. Shirayuki-ranked.

Ignoring what kind of feeling she gives off and judging solely by her appearance, she's an extremely dangerous girl.

And those eyes, sometimes hidden, sometimes appearing from beneath her fringe, were definitely those of a beautiful person.

I felt as if I couldn't bear to speak, and so, all I did was, like giving a

dog a bone, hand over the glasses I had caught just now...

Nakasorachi went "Feh!", taking the glasses and standing up, unsteady...

"...Wh...Who...is it...?"

Nn...? Frowning, she squinted at me. *Sh, shh*

Apparently not getting a clear image, she brought her face closer to mine, putting it so close that I could feel her breathing.

Is it that her eyes aren't good? Or is it that her fringe obscures her vision, making her vision hazy? Or is it both? Anyways, finally able to see my appearance, she,

"!!"

Shuffle Shuffle Shuffle! Thud!

Backing up hurriedly, she smashed into the soundproof wall.

"Ah, waa, it's, a boy, bo-boy, n-no, I'm fine! I'm fine! Bo-bo, like, I like! That's how, I really feel!"

Whoosh

Waving her hands around manically, she was panicked to the point

where I could not understand what she was saying.

Her face, obscured by her hair such that I could only see the bottom part, turned red. Ooh, that's a rapid-blushing technique able to match Aria's.

"Je-Jeanne, suddenly, suddenly suddenly, brought a boy with her...Awaahh."

Her back sliding down the wall...*Shh*

Shhhh...

For some reason, the girl suddenly became alert, and she suddenly straightened her legs.

And...is that how you straighten your legs? That's an amazing X-leg. Not even Shirayuki can match that.

Afterward, putting on her glasses gingerly...

"Gl-glasses, t-th-thathan, you very much..."

She couldn't even say "Thank you very much."

Is your articulation that bad?

"Isn't this the wrong person?"

I couldn't help but turn back, asking Jeanne.

"Nakasorachi is Nakasorachi. Are you unsatisfied with my choice?"

Zcchh Jeanne's eyes stared directly at me...

Helplessly, once again I...looked towards that creature, who appeared to be Nakasorachi.

"Hii."

But once I looked at her, she immediately used the headphones in her hand to block her face.

"So-sorrysorry! So-sorry!"

"No, I haven't sa..."

"I-I-I-I, Jea-Jeanne-san, Jeanne-san was alone, I thought that Jeanne-san was going to come by herself, no-not, a boy, I didn't think that a boy would come, I haven't prepared my heart yet! I'm too excited! Ah, I say excited, but it isn't a happy excitement!"

Wave Wave Wave

As if using sign language, Nakasorachi's hands gestured wildly, without pause.

"W-Which I've only seen from the incam monitor, he's so cool, I-I didn't think he would come here, moreover, Tohyama-kun! Aah..."

Hold on...can this girl communicate properly?

"Tohyama, Nakasorachi is the same as you, and she has some issues with her personality. Please go to that wall."

Shhh While looking at me, Jeanne pointed at one corner of the room. Saying "The same? How are we the same at all?", I grumbled while walking to the wall...

Ba

Nakasorachi had taken a cellphone out of the pocket of her skirt, and being told something by Jeanne, *Patatatata! Patatata!* With a speed that blurred one's eyes, she entered in a cellphone number.

...Who is she calling?

Just as I had thought that, the song, "Melody of Flowers" began flowing out of my cellphone.

Eh. Me?

"...Hello?"

I picked it up.

"--Hello, nice to meet you. Saying this is a little weird, but this is the first time we have met in person. I am Nakasorachi Misaki. Sorry for just now."

Just like a radio announcer, a voice, enunciating each Japanese word with absolute precision, reached my ears.

Eh?

I couldn't help but look at Nakasorachi, but Jeanne had adopted a guard-like pose, standing in front of her.

"I have the bad habit of being easily excited...so, please forgive me, I can only speak with you like this, relying on the phone--Will this be fine?"

"Eh? Ah...It's fine."

Wh-what's with this? What's with this attitude switch?

I don't really understand, but it looks like Nakasorachi has such a personality that, only when she speaks through machines, can she speak steadily. Rather, without them, she can't speak at all. I shouldn't really say this, but she's a weird person.

Shhhh Jeanne turned her head, saying something to Nakasorachi, who was behind her.

"--Is the procedure you would like me to help you with, the audio analysis of the music file in this micro-SD card?"

"Ah, ahh. If you're able to understand something from that sound, please tell us."

Hesitating, I responded to Nakasorachi.

"That is the sound that Reki from Snipe always listens to on her headphones. She said that she was listening to the sound of her birthplace, although...we cannot hear anything, but what sounds like wind. I know that having you try to perform an audio analysis without a video of any kind is a difficult contract--"

"--Not at all. Audio is able to convey much more than video. At least, for me, it is as if seeing a video. Also, because I am in the same normal class as Reki-san, sophomore class C--I can recall her headphones. Reki-san's headphones are...these. Sennheiser PMX990. One of its characteristics is its clarity of sound, a masterpiece which accentuates the higher pitches. Please wait a moment."

Shh I saw Nakasorachi, behind Jeanne, put on a pair of orange headphones--

"..."

For a while, silence.

She's probably started to listen.

I'll just wait here too, silent as well.

I mean, the person I'm speaking to has put their headphones on, after all.

"...An extremely...vast location..."

Within a few moments, I heard Nakasorachi's voice come out of my cellphone.

This is probably a report on what she managed to figure out with the audio track.

"From the echo and speed of the wind, the place of recording was an expansive field--a piece of ground at a high altitude. There are forests close by. Coniferous forests. The sound of the leaves rustling...this is, Larix Sibirica."

He-hey, hey.

Just from the sound...you're able to understand to such a degree?

Now that I think about it--I had learned about this in Inquesta.

Based upon the ambient noise during a telephone conversation or some other method of communication, it is possible to deduce a

specific location based upon said noises. This is the method named, sound investigation.

But, from what I could remember, one needs a computer with special software to do such a thing.

And, Nakasorachi appeared to be able to perform such an analysis with just her ears. It looks like her ears, abnormally good, make up for her eyes.

"Added to that, according to the sounds of the vegetation, this location is probably somewhere between Northern Mongolia and Siberia."

...Mongolia? Siberia...?

Nakasorachi's calm voice reaching my ears, I tilted my head.

"I can hear the breathing of horses. It isn't big, they aren't domesticated, but not completely wild...they're probably the descendants of Mongolia's horses, Equus przewalskii. Also, the howling of wolves...but on the contrary, these howls are quite loud, for wolves. I believe that they are a subspecies of gray wolves, tundra wolves."

As I was feeling overwhelmed by Nakasorachi's sense of hearing as well as her wealth of knowledge--I felt that I was understanding these sounds less and less.

Reki's birthplace...could it be that it's outside Japan?

I couldn't help but frown...looking at my watch.

Ah...this isn't good. Reki's swimming class is going to end soon. If I get too far from her, I might be sniped.

I snapped my cellphone shut, raising my voice, directing it towards Nakasorachi's direction.

"I'm sorry, but I'm out of time. I'll be leaving first...afterward, could you structure what you learned in an e-mail and send it to me? I'll leave that micro-SD here, for now. It's fine if you return it later."

Unable to talk without a machine, Nakasorachi--

"Re...re-re-return it...? Go-go-go-go-go-going to the boy's dormitory, it's impossible! Be-be-because, I don't have any fitting underwear!"

Immediately returning to that regretful personality, she answered with some mysterious words.

What...underwear?

Rather, I hadn't said anything about you coming to the boy's dormitory, right?

Well, after all, this is Butei High, the gathering place of the strange. I sighed...opening the door, preparing to leave the Connect classroom...

Shh And at that moment, Jeanne grasped hold of my arm.

"...What?"

"..."

Wordlessly, she pushed me out of the classroom, and after confirming that there was nobody in the corridor...she said softly, as if whispering,

"Tohyama, be careful."

"Of what?"

"Reki. I didn't say it earlier, because I couldn't confirm the information that I had received, but--before Reki entered Butei High--ever since she was 14, she was not only in Japan, but it seems that she was also active in Russia and China. Because, before her international Detective Armed License was ratified, she had received a Butei License, allowing her to travel to China and Russia."

"...What did she do in those foreign countries?"

"It is not recorded. It's not that nothing was done, but rather, she

was doing an unrecorded job."

"'An unrecorded job'...?

"It's difficult to say, is it fine if I say it?"

"Say it."

"For example, 'Sweeper'."

--Well, I expected as much.

In this business, that is probably the only unrecorded job.

Even in self-defense, a Butei is forbidden to kill. At best, this applies in Japan and Western Europe--but when one talks about reality, Butei that do nothing but kill, do exist.

And, around 70% of such Butei are those that specialize in sniping.

Of course, no matter which country it is, this information is highly classified.

"--I'll pretend that I didn't hear that."

Saying this, I looked out the window.

Reki...

As expected, you are not normal.

Well, from the beginning, I had had such a feeling.

"Tohyama. Since you said that you're under Reki's Sniper Restriction, this problem would be best solved early. I certainly accepted a contract to aid you, but--if you wish to make Lima Syndrome a reality, in the end, you must still build a good relationship between Reki and you."

"I was doing that, but it hasn't been going well."

"Mm, luckily--you and Reki are a boy and girl. There's a strategy."

...A boy and girl? ...A strategy?

Why is it that I don't have a good feeling about this.

"What are you saying I should do?"

"Have you brought Reki into the city? In other words, going on a date."

"Go-going on a date...? No, it wasn't a date, but there was a time where we went to Odaiba to eat ramen."

"You didn't make Reki pay, did you?"

"She didn't pay."

Hearing me say this, Jeanne said, surprised,

"Well done, Tohyama. Reki must have been happy."

"She didn't seem any different to me."

"No. She would have been happy in her heart. After all, this is something that would make anyone happy. Even if that meal cost a mere 100 yen."

More accurately, she didn't use any money.

Because, she ate the super pot ramen within 30 minutes.

"What I wanted to say was this behavior, treating Reki as a girl, treating her gently. Because of your role as a boy, this will have an effect. As long as you continue doing this, you will be able to build a good relationship with Reki. Right, I've thought of a good idea. Why don't you go to Caravan I now? Use that time where you have freedom of action."

"Freedom of action...?"

"Stay by Reki's side during the trip, doing things that girls would like."

"Things that girls would like...what's that? I'm not holding myself

back, but I really am clueless when it comes to that area. Couldn't you tell me something a little more specific? You're a girl too, right?"

"That's--this method may be a little cliche, but use gifts to deepen your relationship. Once girls receive things like clothing or jewelry from boys, they'll feel that some distance has decreased, creating a happy feeling. Even girls and boys that are fighting make up with this method."

"...Then, what shop should I visit to buy such things?"

"For example, a boutique."

Bou-boutique...

That's a really ancient way of saying it...

No, rather than that...

"Don't you think that Reki has no interest in things like fashion...?

"Listen well, Tohyama. There is not a girl on Earth that has no interest in clothing. This is a law of the world."

Rustle Facing Jeanne, who said those words with an earnest face and feeling a little suspicion appear in my heart, I...

"Then, would you be happy as well? For example, if you were to receive some clothes that you liked that I had bought for you from a boutique."

...casually put forth an example.

And...maybe it was because this was an unexpected question, but...

"Clothes that I like?"

Jeanne looked shocked for a moment...and with an attitude very unlike her, she dipped her head a little.

"--N-no. If Tohyama sees me wearing clothes like that...he'll

definitely think I am strange. The fact that the clothes I like don't fit my image, I understand perfectly."

"Your taste in clothes doesn't matter, right?"

"Then, for example...just as an example--I wouldn't mind a fluttering, long skirt with patterns that a girl would like. There should be a headdress. Ah, no, that's just an example."

Since you said it's just an example, why are you leaning towards me? What is this?

"--Whatever. I'm not interested either. What's important is, you wouldn't be happy about something you should be happy about."

"I-I'd be happy about that. Originally, I'd only wear it in my room, but if it was something you bought for me, it's not that I wouldn't specially show it to only you. If you wouldn't tell anybody."

As if she really wanted to show it to me, Jeanne said that with a strange sort of tension, but...

Well, in short, she would be happy. Receiving clothes that a boy bought for her. I understand that.

If that's so for Jeanne, then...there might be a chance that Reki too is affected.

But, for me, this is an amazingly difficult task.

No less than a battle. How depressing.

September 14--

Called a field trip, the journey of team formation had started.

Despite the fact that this, in reality, was not a field trip, on the schedule...the so-called, "Travel Bookmark":

"Location: Keihanshin (Assembly point - Dispersal point)

Day 1: Educational trip to tour Kyoto shrines (Tour at least three points and submit reports afterward.)

Day 2 & 3: Freedom of action (Touring the cities: Osaka, Kobe)"

Was all that was written.

There were no teachers chaperoning. If this were shown to the Ministry of Education, they would fly into a rage.

Crumpling that useless piece of paper into a ball and throwing it away, I--

-stepped onto the Kyoto platform from the Toukaidou Shinkansen, train No. 101.

On the road, I had just been sitting there dazed, but the Shinkansen really is fast. We had left Shinagawa at 7:00, and barely after 9:00 we had arrived.

...*Tap Tap. Scrape Scrape*

Reki and Haimaki followed me off the Shinkansen, stepping down onto the platform.

"..."

I couldn't help but make a pained look at Reki, who wasn't going to leave my side for any reason...

The Butei High girls, taking the same Shinkansen to come here, were all looking this way, whispering something among themselves.

And what they were saying...I could guess. Those few, while they were walking through the train, they saw Reki and I, and immediately, their faces became excited.

...Let's enter the city quickly, disappearing into the crowd.

Aahh...This is the first time I've had a field trip where I've been less able to relax.

But, the fortunate thing is, because of matters dealing with her mother's trial, Aria missed the field trip...and Shirayuki, staying at the Hotogi Kyoto Shrine, would have a hard time going onto the streets.

If they were to meet Reki here and start a battle, they'd definitely give the residents of Kyoto some trouble. The type that tends to occur with stray bullets.

"...Reki, is there somewhere you'd like to go?"

Thinking about Jeanne's suggestion, I asked Reki what she wanted, though I knew it was useless...

Reki shook her head, her hair rustling.

"There isn't really somewhere I'd like to go either. But, the first day, we have to see at least three temples or shrines, submitting a report about them. So, we're going to have to walk a lot, today. It should be fine, right?"

This time, she nodded.

Ah...The Reki as normal.

I fished the guidebook that I had bought in advance out of my bag. Now, I had to think about the routes we should take to go to whichever temple.

During the time we had seen Kiyoumizudera and Kinkakuji, Reki, following at my side, had been wordless from the beginning to the end.

Just, as we were walking through the tourists and geisha, whether it was to keep me from escaping or to keep us from separating, I did not know, but she would grasp my sleeve.

And, known for my misfortune, I would always meet other students just at that moment, "Ah, they're linking their arms." "They're so lovey-dovey." It was like pouring oil on the fire of those horrible rumours.

Because of that, for the sake of not meeting anybody from Butei High...I avoided Ginkaku temple, which was a set location, and following Muto's advice, who had come here before, we went to Sanjuusangendou, where none of my classmates were. I avoided taking the bus, and instead, we took a taxi. Reki is really expensive.

I threw a glance inside from the entrance of the temple,

(Alright, there are no Butei High students.)

After I had confirmed this, I...

I went to the reception to buy tickets, and seeing the notice on the wall: "To the students on Butei High Training School's field trip, please leave your guns and swords etc., here"--I left all my weapons there.

"Reki, leave yours too."

Hearing my words, Reki, more obedient than I thought, left her Dragunov and bayonet at the reception.

It looks like she really will listen to all my orders.

"..."

Suddenly, my gaze a little suspicious, I glanced towards Reki, who was like this.

I had heard...paranoid Butei would hide extremely small folding knives or derringers. And, such people would always stay silent, so that they would not be found out.

"...Open your mouth a little and show it to me."

Hearing my order, Reki raised her head, looking at me...opening her mouth.

Hmm.

There's nothing, for now.

But, it really is small. Her mouth.

Her teeth were neatly arranged, and her tongue too, was like that of a child's.

Well, that's a given, since Reki is a rather small girl.

"Alright. Close it."

Once I had finished speaking, Reki's mouth shut...and like a small animal, she looked up at me.

Seeing this gaze and position, not being able to help but think back to Reki's kiss, I--

"...Then, let's start touring. Make Haimaki wait here."

Flicking my gaze at Haimaki, I entered the hall.

Sanjuusangendou, since ancient times, has been renowned as a place for testing arrows.

It is said that, the 120 meter long main hall, under the eaves, was used for an archery competition called "Arrow Traversal", and even now, it was still continuing, albeit in a different form.

--Now that I think about it, it could be said that this is a temple that has a relationship with sniping.

Walking through the corridor, which was lined with one thousand statues of Zenjuukannon, all neatly arranged in a row, I...glanced towards Reki.

The same as ever...Reki still had that perfectly expressionless face.

Even the statues of Buddha have expressions.

But, only after reaching Kyoto did I know this, statues of Buddha have different expressions.

Reki...didn't seem to have any interest in this place, she just trudged

on alongside me.

For her--a mere 120 meters was a distance where she could probably shoot through the heart of a flea.

I counted the hands of Zenjuukannon, thanking God in my heart that Aria did not have this many. Rather than a Quadra, she'd be a Sendra[9]. Thinking about that, I chuckled...

(If she were here, this trip would definitely be a lot more vigorous.)

Thinking about this, I walked through the corridor.

Although I was together with Reki, we hadn't shared any special feelings...

"...We've finished the tour."

Within a short amount of time, Reki and I had finished touring the hall.

It had just reached afternoon.

It was set down that we were to tour three temples or shrines on the first day, but we had already finished touring three.

(...What should we do...)

Under the fresh, blue, autumn sky, Reki and I arrived at something like a courtyard.

Seeing that, in the middle, there was something like a backless-bench, covered with a red cloth, I sat down...looking over Reki, I gazed upon several windmills, apparently made by the local children.

Suddenly,

"--Kinji-san. When you were walking with me, you were thinking about another girl, were you not?"

Still looking downwards, Reki spoke those words to me.

Surprise

"You were thinking about Aria, were you not?"

Bu-bullseye.

"...How did you know?"

"Just now, when you were walking through the corridor, your smiling face--was the same as the face when you are together with Aria."

Stare

Reki's ice-cold eyes were fixed on me.

Sc-scary.

This is a temple--thank God that weapons are prohibited here.

"Th-that is...Well, I was her partner for an entire semester, I just suddenly thought about it and laughed."

I casually made an excuse, and Reki,

"Please do not get closer to Aria."

-with some sort of terrifying air...she warned me.

I mean, it was extremely slight, but...she was giving a feeling, which seemed to convey the fact that she was angry about something.

And, this was the first time she had spoken since we arrived at Kyoto.

"Are you angry?"

"No."

No, you are angry, aren't you?

For some reason, I felt that the way you said "No," just now was a

little angry.

"You're angry, right?"

"..."

Reki shook her head, her hair rustling.

But, this second denial--she did not speak. Just a gesture. It might be, that that was a sign of weakness.

In short, she was more or less angry. About the fact that, while together with her, I had thought about Aria.

Well...that was certainly my fault...

But, Reki really gets angry for the most inexplicable reasons.

If Reki and I were really engaged, then I'd be able to understand her anger. But, this was something that, according to what Reki had said, something like an arranged marriage...It was not because she liked me that she stays close to me.

Just that, Reki had received some denpa from whatever place--and she was just obeying "wind"-sama's orders.

So, Reki has no reason to get angry about the thing that happened before.

From my standpoint, she was being a little unreasonable.

...With that, I felt a little upset...

"I am not angry."

Towards me, who was like that, as if announcing it to herself--Reki once again denied it.

"Is that true?"

"I am sure that Kinji-san is aware of my nickname."

--Robot Reki.

Have you heard it said yourself?

"Just like what other people say in the shadows, I--do not have the emotions of a normal person. Because, the wind does not like people's 'emotions'."

"..."

The "wind" that Reki had said...it looks like it's a firm delusion, set deep within herself.

"So, I am not angry. I do not laugh, nor do I cry."

Telling me these things in a detached manner, Reki's words made me...completely speechless.

Certainly, I had never seen Reki express her emotions.

I had always believed that that was just because of an overly strong professional consciousness as a "sniper", who seeks calmness in all things, manifesting itself in that pattern...but it seems that that was not all.

Is her emotionless appearance tied in together with her "wind" delusion? If so, this is a profound problem.

(But...)

From the conversation just now--

It may have been just a little, but contrary to her words, I felt that I had caught a glimpse of Reki's feelings.

It had not been completely expressed, but the her as of right now was releasing a sense of unhappiness.

So...definitely...

It's definitely possible. Reki's humanization, and Lima Syndrome as well.

That's what I thought. I could not help but think any other way.

(But...then, what should I do?)

The me as of right now has made her angry. Opposed to that, if I don't make her happy, there will be no hope for Lima Syndrome.

I stared directly at the side of Reki's face, who had resumed her wordless mode, her arms folded...

...

.....

Ah.

A red dragonfly had stopped. On Reki's head.

You, can even bugs mistake you as a statue? Please move a little.

While I was complaining in my heart, I looked at the red dragonfly, sitting on her head like a ribbon, suddenly thinking back to Jeanne's words. "That's--this method may be a little cliche, but use gifts to deepen your relationship. Once girls receive things like clothing or jewelry from boys, they'll feel that some distance has decreased, creating a happy feeling. Even girls and boys that are fighting make up with this method."

...There's no choice.

Because I have no more cards to play, I'll have to try using Jeanne's method.

In the movie I had seen on TV, "Pretty Woman", there was this kind of scene.

But...I'm not familiar with Kyoto.

I have no idea of what is sold where.

Go out to Osaka? After all, I had gone there before, together with Nii-san.

Doing something like going with a girl to buy things, it's rather

impossible for me, but...

This is for the sake of Lima Syndrome.

Written on Masters' schedule was the fact that Osaka too was a city where we could go see shrines, so it's two bird with one stone.

"Reki."

"Yes."

"Let's walk to Osaka for a while. So we can shop together."

Hearing me say that, Reki looked at me with, for some reason, a little surprise, before she nodded--

As if confirming the fact I had started to understand a little, a sort of soothed feeling began to flow out of Reki.

She remained expressionless, but, if I were to use Haimaki as a comparison, it'd be a state in which his tail was wagging slightly.

What...are you happy about me saying: "We can shop together"? I don't understand girls at all.

After taking the train for around an hour, we arrived at Shinsaibashi, Osaka.

This place was the gathering place of teenagers, well, to put it in terms of Kyoto, it's a location akin to that of Shibuya or Harujuku.

Clothing stores and accessory shops were everywhere.

Since we're going shopping for the sake of starting Lima Syndrome against Reki, then Keihanshin should be a good place.

But, exiting the subway, which was like a mole, Reki and I, wearing bulletproof uniforms...stood out amongst the crowd of teenagers, wearing very current and fashionable clothes.

"Coming here was good, but...I don't know it at all, the fashion of

this city, that is."

I said it, half to myself,

"I do not know either."

After Reki said that, we stood there, at a loss of what to do.

"..."

"..."

After all, the location that Introvert and Wordless shouldn't have gone to, is here.[10]

(But, this is also for the sake of putting Lima Syndrome into action against Reki.)

I motivated myself, setting off down the busy street.

I can't say that I'm wealthy--but it's not like I don't have any money.

During July, my bank account had received the halved reward of the casino security detail, and the compensation of the commissions I took during the summer holiday may have been small, but I still received it from Butei High.

But...the "boutique" that Jeanne had mentioned was here and there, but I had no idea of anything to do with fashion.

Buying things that would make girls, Reki included, happy...I had no idea of what those things might be.

"Reki. What kind of casual clothes do you wear?"

Not knowing, I asked her directly,

"I do not have casual clothes."

"...Are you saying that you have nothing but your uniform?"

"Yes."

She responded with an answer that was completely expected, and I increasingly felt the urge to drop to my knees in despair.

This is so difficult. Then, I'll directly make Reki walk and look for a store that she wants to go to. I'll just spend some time drinking coffee there or something.

No...letting Reki, who has no consciousness of the outside world, or rather, no common sense at all, walk wherever she wants to, is dangerous.

This street is full of boys radiating a feeling of nanpa, and Reki will have no idea of their ulterior motives. Even during the Casino security detail, she had trouble with the womanizing CEO.

With that in mind, I brought Reki along with me, and without any real purpose, we walked onwards.

If you let a dog walk on its own, it will hit a pole. As I thought about that, glancing at Haimaki, plodding along beside us...

Kuh.

This place too, has a few students from Tokyo Butei High.

Because the boys were wearing the same uniform as me, and the girls were wearing a dark-red sailor uniform, I noticed it immediately.

They too had finished their touring of the temples early, and were now touring the city...they seemed to be coming here to play. Over here, there was also an Osaka Butei High, they were moving with that as a destination. Damn it.

Not wanting to be disturbed by them again, because of Reki, I--

-thinking that whatever shop would be fine, I looked around.

Convenience store, clubhouse, a neko-design cafe...in my line of sight, next to the cafe, "Chaton B", a select shop aimed towards girls, appeared before my eyes.

Alright. I'll just go in here.

With that, I pushed forward into the store--Reki followed me, her footsteps quick.

Haimaki, wiping his paws on the mat at the entrance, followed us from there.

It looks like a very fashionable shop, but it's fine. We're two Butei, bringing a wolf too, after all.

Inside "Chaton B", there were a lot of neko designs as well...they seemed to be using a forest as an image theme, the shelves and cases were all made out of wood. The decorations were all leaves and vines too.

This ambiance...isn't so bad.

I was a little worried that we would be kicked out for bringing in a wild animal, but the female assistants, with tea-colored hair, said: "Welcome~~, oh, cuuteee~!", hugging Haimaki.

Thank God. This seems to be a store where pets are OK. What a relief.

Haimaki wagged his tail, looking up at the assistants with a face that seemed to convey the message, "I'm a good boy!".

You can really read the mood, can't you. I hope that your master over there can watch and learn.

"--I'm sorry. Could you lend me your ears for a while?"

Hearing me say this and going "Mm?", the assistants thrust their heads towards me, next to my face...

"I...am in a certain situation, and I have to buy something for that girl over there, but...she doesn't really know what kind of clothes she likes, so would it be possible for you to pick something for her?"

If one wants ice cream, he goes to an ice cream parlor. "Shirts"

,"Skirts", "Pants." I, confused and ignorant about any of these phrases that girls use, should ask the assistants, right?

Thinking this, I explained the situation to them honestly--and the onee-san smiled at me strangely.

"Situation, huh? An-san, it's that, right? Yer preparing to break through her barrier, right? I knew it from a glance. That girl's guard is pretty firm."

Uu...this person, is she something like a former Butei? I have no idea.

If one is aiming for Lima Syndrome, they have to destroy the barrier around the opponent's heart.

And, the barrier around Reki's heart was extremely strong. For the sake of breaking through it, I came here to go shopping so we can improve our relationship.

I thought that there was probably no-one undergoing Sniper Restriction from a girl, but Osaka Butei High is near here, it could be that this shop was often visited by Butei.

"--Speaking truthfully, that's how it is. I was hoping that you could help me solve this."

Forgetting my embarrassment during the journey, I said that--

"Hehe~. You're naughty~"

Said the Onee-san, nudging me with her elbow.

Eh. What did you say?

Why would you call me naughty?

"Isn't it great, young lady? This boy wants to buy something for ya~. Afterwards, give him a kiss, a'right?"

Ki-kiss?

Wh-what? It looks like we've misunderstood something.

"Leave it to me! I'm a genius at choosin' clothes based on my customers' sizes. Alright, young lady, tell me ya height and weight. And, ya three sizes, hehehe."

"150 centimeters, 41 kilograms, 76 centimeters, 50 centimeters, 73 centimeters."

"Ooh, cuutee~. On a closer look~, ya have a really pretty~ face, y'know~. Almost like a diamond gem~."

Answering casually while pushing Reki's back, the onee-san brought Reki deeper into the shop.

"Why don'tcha sit down over there and have some coffee while ya wait, an-san?"

"A-ah."

Coffee?

Not really knowing how things go at this store, I followed her instructions, sitting by the table, and quickly, from "Chaton Cafe", which seemed to have some sort of relationship with this place, another onee-san, wearing a brooch with a different cat-design, came, holding a menu, smiling all the while. Ku. I have to pay for the coffee as well.

Rather, when did I say I was going to shop here?

The people here really know how to run a business.

A group of girls, holding select shop "Chaton B"'s paper bags, and boys, seeming to be buying the girls their clothes, were drinking tea and coffee while talking, seeming to be waiting for a certain event.

Surrounded by these people, all speaking Osaka-ben, which my ears weren't accustomed to, I, the outsider, folded my arms, waiting...

"How's it?"

With that, the onee-san from earlier had brought--

Reki's appearance made me spit out the coffee I was drinking with an "Ehnn!"

The reason for that was--

A kindergarten uniform...! Although it was made to be worn for adults.

"Wh-what the hell is that!"

Wiping a paper napkin around my mouth, I pushed the chair back.

Wearing a yellow kindergarten hat along with a water-blue smock and standing there wordlessly, Reki had a tag with "れき" written on it pinned to her chest.[11]

N-no, even more than that...those legs had become horrifying. I had thought that the length of the skirt would be to scale with a normal kindergartener's skirt, but it was a shocking mini-size. It stopped 1 centimeter below the inseam.

Seeing the sheathe for her bayonet, gunchira (Seeing the area under the skirt where guns and knives are hidden. Namer: Idiot Muto), was happening even now.

"..."

Reki was, as ever, in her living mannequin mode, standing straight.

(Wh-what a lifeless kindergartener...)

Her hair was also tied back with a rubber band, and she really looked like a child that had been turned overly big with magic.

"...?"

Seeing my reaction, Reki looked up and down at her own appearance a little.

I mean...there's no need to wear that kind of thing so obediently.

Some people, upon seeing this, would burst into tears out of happiness, but I have no interest in that kind of thing.

"An-san~, ya made a nice, 'Eeh!', reaction. But...why'd ya do that? I thought that she'd fit this kinda childish clothin'."

"O-of course, if it fits well, it fits well, but...don't use these kinds of clothes please...at least, something that she can walk outside in..."

I...slumped over the table, trying to plead with the onee-san, somehow.

"An-san, this ain't a joke ya know. But, somethin' for the nighttime would be nice, right? Hehehe."

For the nighttime...?

Is she planning to use it as pajamas? She'll catch a cold if she wears that kind of skirt, right?

Well...it looks like this cosplay was just a prank. Is this part of their culture too?

Looks like such things exist when you go on a trip.

Behind Reki, whose kindergarten skirt was fluttering as she was led into the changing room, I wiped my sweat off.

Ah, onee-san. Please close the curtain of the changing room.

You just left a subtle gap, making it so that only people from my angle could see it, right?

You probably think that you're doing me a favor, but it's just a complete annoyance for me. That action, that is.

That kindergarten uniform was something that made me extremely surprised--

But, it too was something that fit Reki really well, the shop assistant onee-san was really good at choosing an outfit that matches with

her customer.

Afterward, calling it "Jungle girl," she made Reki wear clothes with a reindeer pattern...it fit her too. There was no incompatibility.

After that, wearing something very similar to the frilly dresses that Riko usually wears, it was a lolita costume. (Under Riko's persistent reminding, I finally remembered.) Originally, this seemed to be clothing that was meant to be worn by rather lively girls, but with Reki wearing it, she looked like an antique doll.

But, this kind of clothing would make the sleeves get caught when readying her sniper rifle, so, from the Butei standpoint, I denied it...

Lastly, the assistant said, "Next is my favorite," taking out some clothes from the corner of the shop so Reki could try them on.

Because makeup was part of the service, Reki was really sealed inside the changing room by the onee-san.

I finally realized that some cats that Chaton Cafe was taking care of were walking around, understanding why it was OK for Haimaki to enter, but I was wondering whether it was really hygienic as I waited...

Reki hadn't come out for a while.

Drinking my coffee and feeling a little bored, I went outside for a little while...

Suddenly, I thought about something. I spent some time buying little things at the outdoor stalls.

I returned to Chaton B,

"...Ahh, ya really look like a diamond gem～..."

Saying that, I heard a voice, shocked at something, from the changing rooms--

Rustle After the curtain had opened, a slender foot, wearing white, high-heeled sandals exited the changing room.

Tap Tap Once again making her appearance inside the shop, Reki...

The assistants, Chaton Cafe's customers, I...even Haimaki, everyone's gaze was drawn to her, fixated on her.

Makeup applied, her hair combed and set properly, wearing a white sleeveless one-piece, the lack of sleeves its highlight, Reki was--

(S-so...beautiful)

That's what I thought, from the bottom of my heart.

Those exquisite features, already looking as if she was a work of art, confirmed onee-san's words. She was like a sparkling diamond.

Painstakingly polished by this process of outfitting herself and applying makeup, really, all eyes were focused on her.

One portion of the white cloth, made of what looked like fine silk, accentuated the lines of her body, which were already highlighted by the illumination of the store, making the sense of transparency that Reki already gave off even stronger.

I thought that if Aria takes the time to beautify herself, she could be on the cover of fashion magazines, and Reki...was the same.

Well, Aria would be on one of those popular magazines that everyone reads--and Reki would be on those high class fashion magazines aimed at ojou-samas. If I had to make a distinction, that would be it.

"..."

Even with that, Reki wasn't making any special expressions, but as if checking herself out, she looked into the full-body mirror, her gaze somewhat satisfied.

Well, that's...probably because she thinks it won't hinder her in battle.

"Ehh, then, is this what you want?"

Seeing that Reki and I had nothing to say, the onee-san whipped out a chocolate colored calculator.

...*Tap Tap Tap Tap*. She entered in the prices.

"One piece and sandals...as well as the inner clothing, 'ight. Here ya go."

Looking at the numbers on the calculator that had been handed to me, I...

--Uwoah!

...as if there was a gun pointed at me, I reflexively dodged away from the calculator.

--Hi-high!

Isn't this 10 times the price of the clothes sold at UNIQLO!?

I'll really use all my money and become homeless. If I pay for this.

At this kind of time, what kind of Osaka speech should I use to get a good result?

Justa prank? Didn't study? Damn it, I knew I should've learned these kinds of words from Muto, who was originally from Kobe.

As if drawing my gun, my hands trembling, my fingers reached for my wallet--at that moment.

"Kinji-san."

Looking just like an ojou-sama, Reki moved her lips, delicately coated with lip gloss, making a sound.

"...?"

Whoosh With that, Reki's gaze, which had been appraising herself, moved--I followed it.

"Popular! From 15:00 today Chaton B and Chaton Cafe's joint event

☆ Chaton Call ☆

As the winner's reward, the price of everything that is bought today at Chaton B is halved!"

That was written on a small blackboard with colored chalk.

Glancing at my watch, it was just 14:55.

Looking up at the onee-san, I saw that she had an expression which conveyed: "Ya realized it, huh?"

I see. Aiming for this event--were the boy and girl customers that were buying clothes at "Chaton B" and chatting at "Chaton Cafe".

"Reki, come. Drink some tea as well."

A little uneasy about the scent of the foundation, wafting this way in Reki's wake as she walked towards me, I, not knowing the contents, went to "Chaton Call", determined to take part.

This joint event--would be our first mission together.

These are pitiable words, but I'll have to do this for real.

Because, whether or not we become homeless, is down to this.

According to the assistant's explanation, Chaton Call was this store's unique event, a competition to see how many of the cats walking around Chaton Cafe could be called to one's table.

The time limit is one minute. If you stand up from your seat, you are disqualified, and touching the cats with your hands is forbidden too.

The prerequisite for participation is: the people involved have to be a couple, but since things had come to this, I had no choice but to sacrifice everything to win this.

I was embarrassed to the point where I wanted to die, however, we could use the fact that, for some reason, we were mistaken as lovers, meeting the prerequisites.

"Participating couple name: Kinji - Reki"...My hand, shaking uncontrollably, wrote our names on the blackboard.

Now, the money I had had been slightly decreased by the tea that Reki had drunk, and it had fallen below the price of the clothes that had been shown to us earlier.

Since things had come to this, I had to gift Reki with these clothes. Not winning, or running away with the clothes, was not an option.

Now that I think about it, didn't something like this happen at the ramen shop in Odaiba?

It seems that Reki was born under the star for putting my wallet in danger. Please make that star go supernova.

(But...calling cats and keeping them, huh...)

This was something that I hadn't even considered practicing for, a mission that was completely out of my expectations.

Honestly, we have no chance of winning.

Because, for some unknown reason, I don't get along well with animals. Ever since I was a child. What do I do?

"So, have ya made ya preparations? Alright, start!"

Despite the fact that I was so nervous, the onee-san, over at the cafe, made her announcement, the noise entering the mic amplified by the speakers.

The groups of couples inside the shop started going, "Here kitty, here kitty," making whistling noises, starting to call the cats towards them.

But, cats are extremely cautious creatures.

Just wandering around inside the shop, they weren't going to suddenly get close to people they hadn't seen before.

"He-here."

I gestured at a cat whose eyes I had met--but, with a purr, it looked the other away.

Damn it. The shop knew this, which is why they had this event, right? Since the cats aren't familiar with anybody, everybody will be disqualified, as written on the blackboard.

"I-I have to think of something..."

From in front of me, who was becoming agitated, Reki, sitting up straight in front of her untouched tea, which had gotten cold,

"I do not really understand, but is it fine if I gather all the cats?"

She asked, as if it had nothing to do with her.

"That's right. But, it's not easy. It seems like these cats have been trained to not respond no matter how much the customers call them."

"..."

I told her softly, and Reki went silent for moment--not even looking in the direction of the cats, *Bch*

...She closed her eyes for a long moment, and that unchanged expressionless face--

"Nyan."

She said.

...

...Ny...

..."Nyan"...did she say...?

I didn't hear incorrectly. She definitely said it.

She had just uttered something that was capable of entering the best three of, 'words most unlikely to come out of Reki's mouth'. Overwhelmingly rare.

I mean...Having said "Nyan", was she trying to imitate a cat's purr? She doesn't sound like one at all.

With just the same monotone as ever, all she said was, "Nyan".

Before, in Ueno, the imitation that Aria had done was better. That

too was amazingly horrible, but an imitation as bad as this makes me unable to even say that it's an imitation.

As my heart shattered into pieces, just about to concede defeat...

--*Tense*--

All the cats in the store raised their heads in unison.

"...!?"

Looking around, each one of the cats was looking at this table--rather, looking at Reki.

Tap...*Tap Tap*...

"Wha...?"

"Eh...!?"

The clothing store's onee-san and the cafe's onee-san made sounds of disbelief.

I was sitting there, dazed, and under my table--

The cats...had gathered there without exception...!

"Re-Reki, you..."

"This is fine, right?"

By Reki's feet, who had just said that...White, black, spotted, striped.

The cats were gathered there, as if believers listening to a preacher.

Now...now that I think about it, Reki...had done something similar to this in the first semester. She had spoken to the grey wolf, which was completely hostile towards us, immediately taming it. Right now, that wolf was Haimaki.

Somehow, Reki seems to be a inexplicable girl that is able to undergo communication with animals. Although such a thing isn't

possible for humans.

The "Nyan" from earlier was...

...definitely a signal to the cats, the contents being: "Come here. If you don't, horrible things will happen."

No, seeing as how obedient the cats were, it was probably a strong message, something like: "If you don't come, I will whip you into the ground. I will set Haimaki on you."

"Cha-Chaton Call--The winners are the couple, Kinji and Reki!"

Co-couple, you said?

Please, I beg of you the cafe's onee-san, don't use that kind of speakers to say that in such a loud voice.

I didn't tell you this, but this is because we're just pretending to be a couple.

"From now onwards, please continue to get along well and love each other! We'll be supporting ya!"

Please...please stop.

The onee-san from Chaton B said, "Us sisters here will work hard!", and in full view of the other customers, she brazenly gave me the cash coupon for a 50% discount.

With this, you can spread the words of what a nice atmosphere this shop has. You really have the soul of a businessman.

Rather, were you sisters?

"Alright, victory kiss! Kiss!"

The onee-san's in Chaton Cafe were saying that, as if venting their feelings.

The customers started chanting, "Kiss! Kiss!", a kiss call.

...I'm sorry. That's not happening.

"We-well, we did it, somehow."

As I reached for my wallet with a sense of relief--

"--Kinji-san."

Not even flashing a courteous smile in the midst of everybody's applause, Reki--*Click*, suddenly stood up.

"?"

"Please stand."

What? I stood up, and--

Squeeze

Reki, from a distance I could not dodge, as if dancing, embraced me around the waist.

"He-hey...!"

Reki's hand, completely unnoticeable from looking at it--was strong.

With some sort of intention, she restricted me close to herself.

Seeing Reki finally bring her lips up to my cheek, the store erupted with cheers.

And, looking as if she was kissing me to the surrounding people, Reki--voicelessly, whispered by my ear,

"Somebody is following us."

--What?

"Please do not move your gaze unnaturally. I do not know who it is, but I am afraid that it is an S-rank professional. At the start, he showed no signs of aggression, but now, he is openly radiating hostility. From outside the store--near the entrance, he is observing this place."

"Wh-when did this start...?"

"Kinji-san, did you leave the store just now?"

"Ah, yeah."

Just now, taking advantage of the time that Reki was sealed inside the changing room...

I went outside, buying some things from the open-air stalls.

"--I think it was from that point onwards. After I had worn these clothes and strode out of the changing room, I could feel that gaze. After we arrived at this city, I felt that somebody was following us for a moment--but after that, I thought that they had retreated."

There's somebody following us...?

Who is it? Why are they following us?

Acting calm, I returned to my seat, and as if nothing had happened, I started twirling the spoon sitting next to my coffee.

I had learned about this in Inquesta. For the sake of preventing your gaze or actions from being noticed by the enemy, you have to, like this...use something like a mirror to check your surroundings.

And on the curved surface of the spoon, I successfully caught the reflection of the entrance--

"..."

At that time, a breeze had just blown past, making that rouge skirt...

I just made out part of a twin-tail.

A pink one.

(--Aria?)

Reflexively turning back out of shock--

-standing at the entrance of the shop, looking in discreetly, Aria's gaze met mine.

--*Da!*

Seeing Reki and I together, her expression, for some reason, looked as if the world had ended, Aria twisted around violently, running away.

At that instant, for a reason unbeknownst to even me, I immediately stood up!

Impulsively dashing out of the store.

"--Aria, wait!"

On this boulevard, crowded with teenagers, seemingly hard to run through, I quickly caught up to Aria.

"～～～～～～～～～～～～～!"

Trying to shake off my hand viciously, Aria was in a state of agitation where she couldn't even say a word.

What. Why are you so mad?

"I-it's fine for you! Because I haven't said it to you clearly! But, Reki--Reki, I definitely told! That girl, kn-knew full well! Reki! Reki--I won't forgive you! Reki, you...Reki, you!"

In an agitated state, Aria was in a mode where I could not understand a word she was saying.

Her twin tails in a tangle, she directed a constant stream of abuse at Reki, who wasn't here--

"You too--let go of me! I'm busy! Just that, before going to Kure, I came to Osaka Butei High to get some equipment that I had left here! Because, Muto Goki and Riko are waiting for me at Kure!"

Kure...Hiroshima? And, Riko and Muto? What's with that. Does it have something to do with Kanae-san's trial?

Towards me, who was just about to ask that, Aria--

"I'm busy!"

Thud! A fist collided into the space between my eyebrows.

"As a couple with Reki!"

Kch! She swept me off my feet.

"I hope you're happy!"

Thud!

Stepping on my face, which had been brought to the floor in an instant, she vanished into the crowd.

"Y-you...What was that!"

At that moment, Haimaki caught up with me, who had shouted that.

Is the reason that Aria left with such haste because she noticed him?

No, not only Haimaki.

Because, I had also vaguely felt--Reki, from some unknown location, was staring this way.

And, she was using the scope of her Dragunov.

Once again, Aria had been pushed away by that killing intent.

Aah. Caravan I, despite the fact that this was an activity where we're supposed to make teams...the relationship between Aria and Reki, as well as I, was getting worse and worse.

--It had already reached a point where reconciliation was impossible.

4th Ammo: Flash Cannon

Butei Charter article 4: Butei must be independent.

Butei High's field trip follows this rule, making its students find lodging for themselves.

Because Reki will definitely stay with me, even at night, I, not willing to be mocked by my classmates...booked an isolated hotel in northeast Kyoto, at the forest near Mount Hiei, online. After all, the site said that pets are OK.

We took a minibus, going along the driveway, disembarking at a desolate night path...

Standing there all alone, the hotel, "Bee's child", had a retro appearance, and personally, I liked it.

If she was a normal high school student, she'd definitely scream, "I don't want to stay at such an old place!" However, Reki, wearing her dress, her Butei High uniform in a paper bag...didn't say anything. I'm so glad that, at times like these, I don't need to worry about her.

Clatter Clatter, I opened the sliding door at the entrance, and an unexpectedly young landlady welcomed us from inside.

"My, my. Welcome."

"Ah, um...I'm the Tohyama that reserved a place here online. I reserved two rooms...but, I'm a little short on money, so could you change one of the two rooms into a cheaper one?"

So I said to her...Wearing typical Japanese clothing, the landlady looked between Reki and I...

"My, my～, ufufufu."

Covering her mouth with her sleeve, she narrowed her eyes happily.

...?

"Customer-han, since that is the case, wouldn't it be fine if ya switched ta one room? Ya can stay together with yer girlfriend."

Fufufu. The landlady said so extremely happily. I waved my hands violently, saying,

"N-no, she isn't my girlfriend."

"I am his girlfriend."

Eh? I turned my head, and the person who had cut in was Reki.

Wh-what are you claiming to be?

"The hotel is the subject of the sentence, and the only other girl here is me. Therefore, the third person noun for such a situation would be 'she'."[12]

Her speech like that of a teacher's, the robot girl said these things as if putting forth a counterargument.

"Mmnnn, I'm so jealous about how innocent you two are～～. Saori is so jealous～～."

With a strange movement like that of a little girl, the landlady swayed left and right.

She seemed to be dancing in time with the pendulum affixed behind her.

Facing her, who, if I were to put her in a manga panel, was scattering hearts everywhere, the landlady--Saori-san

"Ah, no...she's a girl that's a little bit...that..."

I wanted to try explaining Reki to her, but...

"Fortunately, there aren't any other guests today, so I'll prepare a nice room for ya, OK?"

Saori spun around, daintily walking inside, bringing us in.

The "Room of the Western Front" that we had been led into was a luxurious 8-tatami room, the tatami is completely new.

Aptly named, the walls of the room were decorated with vividly colored Nishijin, which looked like tapestries.[13]

In front of the silk was a vase, which looked big enough for someone to enter, raising the overall feeling of classiness.

This is an amazingly...good room. Almost too good.

Preferring Japanese-styled rooms to the rooms in modern city-hotels, I was extremely thankful to the landlady, who had given us such a high-class room for such a reasonable price, but...

The problem is, the fact that Reki is sharing a room with me.

For these few days, I had been living in Reki's room, but that was just a desolate emptiness. Rather than, "living" together with Reki, the mood was more like, "in the midst of battle."

So, I was able to somewhat convince myself, but--

Staying in the same room during a trip, however, the mood was completely different.

"..."

"..."

Reki and I were sitting next to the wooden table, eating the food that the landlady, Saori-san, had quickly prepared for us. It was delicious, but I was agitated to the point where I wasn't sure what I was eating.

(He-heavy, this atmosphere...)

Reki and I...for some reason...

Isn't this ambiance something like the "couple that ran away together for whatever reasons" atmosphere, so commonly found in

old movies?

And, the majority of those would be, the so-called adult movies...and afterward, it will go into something where I can't help but avert my eyes, pushing the fast-forward button...that stimulating scene.

Ah...

(I may be alone with Reki, but because we have nothing to talk about...I'm thinking about these unnecessary things.)

Stare Looking in front of me, Reki, sitting up straight, was eating her meal from the right to left, just gradually eating, as if the taste was completely irrelevant.

In a short while, she had finished all the rice, next, she ate all the tempura, from then on, it was sashimi, and lastly, she drank the miso soup in one gulp.

"..."

Afterwards, having finished our meal, together, Reki and I put our cellphones, both out of charge, on top of the TV, and each of us plugged our respective phones into our respective chargers.

When I had released my cellphone because there was nothing that I could do...I ordered Reki to: "Sit at the wall," sleeping at the sliding door at the other end of the room.

Us two, completely silent, could hear the sound of crickets coming from outside of the paper walls...

In the silence of the long, autumn night, it stood out even further.

"..."

Following my orders, Reki was sitting at the wall, apparently resting after she had eaten, staying completely still.

...Even though she's wearing such a beautiful dress, she's still sitting upright.

Turning my back on Reki, who was in that kind of position, I fell asleep...

Slide

"Forgive my rudeness."

The sliding door in front of my eyes opened, and Saori-san, kneeling in the corridor, had made her appearance once again.

"--How was your meal?"

"Ah, yes, it was delicious. Thank you for the meal."

Completely caught off guard, I sat up straight, slightly panicked, and Saori-san, seeing the distance between Reki and I--

She made an expression: "I grow tired of this."

"If yer completely finished with ya meal, then feel free ta take a bath. Because, today, both of ya are my only customers...You can use the hot springs for a while."

A bath...?

Flashing a face at me which said *Give it your best shot*, because of Saori-san's expression--

I had a bad feeling about this.

Confirming my premonition, the hot springs at the hotel didn't have any signs with "Men's bath", or "Women's bath".

In short, this was a mixed bath.

--Mixed hot springs.

For me, a no-man's land.

When I had strode into the ICBM hangar in I-U, I was completely unarmed...and now, this was like entering there naked.

But, today was quite hot, so I had sweated a little, so I had no choice but to go bathe.

According to what Saori-san had said, there were no other customers, so there was no danger of being surrounded by any hostiles (= women).

"Reki, you, absolutely, cannot come in here. Absolutely forbidden. Absolutely."

In the room, having warned Reki--somehow, feeling as if I was the preview act for a comedy routine--I headed towards the hot springs.

Thankfully, this hotel had a service where Saori-san would wash our clothes for us while we were inside the bath.

As such, I put my clothes inside the laundry basket...*Rattle*, opening the sliding door...

Because I had confirmed that no-one was around, I walked to the bath that was formed by rocks and a bamboo wall, lowering myself into the water in order to wash myself.

(...)

This...feels amazingly good.

The temperature of the bath, lukewarm, was exactly to my liking, and besides that, the fact that I was alone allowed me to slip into a state of complete relaxation.

It was as if the fatigue from the journey was seeping out of me, into the bath.

Inside the steam of the bath, slowly wisping upwards, I...

(I wonder what everyone from Butei High is doing...we're on a trip, so they're probably having fun right now.)

...thought about my classmates, time flowing by.

After thinking about this and that, it was already 9:00 at night.

Looking towards the stars, I saw that they were visible in the midst of the steam, and it was a beautiful sight. This is something that would be described as 'elegant'.

Buzzz....*Buzzz*...

The sound of insects from the forest.

Hooo...Hooo

What I had heard from the faraway forest was the call of an owl. It had been a while since I'd last heard it.

And, *Rattle*...

The sound of the sliding door opening.

(...Mm...?)

Splash The sound of splashing water.

Splash...*Splash*.

(...Mmm...!?)

And, *Splash*--

The sound of someone's foot entering the bath.

--That!

"Hey!"

Splash!

Standing up immediately, I dropped the towel that was sitting on my head, and catching it, I--covered one specific part of my body, backing up.

Looking into the steam, the figure which I could see belonged to a--

Gi-girl.

Rather, no matter how I looked at it, it was Reki.

Leaning against the large rock at one side of the hot spring, was a Dragunov.

Moreover, this was beyond obvious, but--she was naked.

One wouldn't be able to say that Reki had a nice figure, even as flattery, since she had a body akin to a middle school student, but...

Seeing the lines of her body where the steam was thin, she really had feminine, beautiful curves.

Comparing is something that I would never do, but...her body was less flat than Aria's.

The plumpness of her chest was like that of an unripe plum, or an apple. A slender waist. Her skin, normally reminiscent of ceramics, was shining even more, light reflected off the condensation of the steam, its pigment slightly flushed.

"Re-Reki...!"

--Reki isn't a robot, after all. She's a person. And she was, very clearly, a girl.

The image she gave off, far from being anything like a normal girl, couldn't even be said to be human, but at this moment...I was made sharply aware of this sense of lust, of immorality. Reki, was a girl.

But--

If that is so, then why. Why did she enter the bath with me so calmly. We are no longer children with no sense of the relationships between men and women, just playing with bubbles.

The one saving grace was...because of the steam, I had no way of clearly seeing Reki, who was standing three meters away from me.

After, all I can do is hope that this steam, almost unnaturally thick, doesn't disperse, for any reason.

"I-I said not to come, so why..."

Hearing me say that, Reki turned her small face, veiled by her damp short hair, looking this way.

"Yes. Kinji-san gave me that order--but, I sensed danger, and I came to protect you."

Eh, for me, you're the most dangerous thing here!

Looking at Reki, who had ignored my orders, entering the hot springs, I could only dip myself back into the water, hiding my body.

Calm down...you have to calm down...Kinji...!

The trigger to Hysteria Mode, is the heart.

As long as my heart keeps calm, then I should...be able to suppress it!

Alright, think of normal things. Think about the primary reason for bathing.

Bathing is something that one does to cleanse oneself, dispelling the pressure on one's soul.

There were no unhealthy impulses behind it. Absolutely not.

"Pro-protect me? Protect me from what...!"

I wrapped the towel around my waist, and with an immovable resolve, I strode out of the bath.

Keeping my breathing steady, I turned my face, following the bamboo fence towards the exit.

Splash

The splashing sound that Reki made, apparently coming my way, made my heart skip a beat.

"--I have felt an ill wind. Please do not go too far from my side."

Feeling the flow of blood become ever more dangerous, I ignored Reki's words, leaving the hot springs.

Taking deep breaths, confirming the status of my body's core...

I-I did it. I'm safe. I overcame it.

Reki is definitely a beautiful girl. She's as cute as a small animal, a girl who carries an inexplicable, indescribable attraction.

But--in reality, it appears that it's hard for me to go into Hysteria because of her.

I still don't know the reason, however, having been kissed by her once before and transforming, I could not let my guard down, not for any reason.

My uniform, during the time that I was in the bath, had already been cleaned and dried by the landlady, Saori-san.

Thanking her gratefully in my heart and wearing my uniform, having returned to "The Room of the Western Front", I never thought that my agitated blood flow would become even more excited...

Because, inside the room, there was a huge futon.

And, there was only one.

Added to that, the two pillows on top of it were pressed together, intimately.

(Did...Did Saori-san do this...!)

This will definitely--even someone as slow as me understood the underlying meaning behind this scene--preventing me from composing myself.

I opened the cabinet in a panic, but it was empty, there were no other futons prepared.

(What do I do...!)

Kinji, what do you do! You're out of the frying pan and into the fire!

The futon and pillow were wondrously soft, making one feel as comfortable as if it was heaven. Although, sleeping in it alone and making Reki sit on the tatami...I thought that I'd get an ulcer out of guilt.

But, if I let Reki sleep inside, heaven will immediately become hell.

Just thinking about it triggered slight Hysteria, an extremely dangerous action.

Maybe, if I use this side, and she uses that side...?

I separated the pillows, placing them at opposite ends of the futon, and my mind was running scenarios of what this would look like while asleep.

Th-this won't do. This kind of distance would be covered just by one of us rolling over.

And, I have no reason to wear the complete protective gear, Armament Set C, to sleep.

Because, yukata were placed next to the pillow, meant to act as pajamas.

--Yukata are very dangerous. Because, they can be stripped off in an instant.

Also, comparatively, my sleeping posture is quite bad. When I was a child, I had stayed at the Hotogi shrine, wearing a yukata...but, once I woke up, I noticed that, sleeping next to me, Shirayuki, Kiriyuki, Kazayuki, and Konayuki, (there were only 4 sisters then,) were pressed against me like a sandwich.

If that kind of scene appears in a situation like this, where Reki and I, a boy and girl, are alone together--whether it be in the dead of the night or at the crack of dawn, because of Hysteria Mode, I will really do some things that will render me unable to do anything but submit a wedding application.

I cannot let such a thing come to pass.

I held up one pillow, and like Nakasorachi in Connect, I started rolling around the futon...

--*Rattle*

At that moment, Reki, changed back into her uniform, opened the door.

Having been completely unaware of her presence, I, shocked, started swinging the pillow, twice, thrice.

"Ah, no, we're only two people, so we can't have a pillow fight."

Saying things that even I didn't understand, I exerted all my willpower, forcing myself to act calm, keeping the pillow inside the cabinet.

Hey, hand. My hand. Stop shaking.

No matter what, I cannot let the topic turn to the futon...

Steeling myself in my heart, I-

"No-now that I think about it...what happened to Haimaki?"

-asked this question, which I had been thinking of, trying to lead away from the topic.

On the other side, Reki, going her own pace, grasped the Dragunov as if it was a stick...and at the wall, she sat upright.

"--He's inside the room."

"Inside the room?"

I asked because he wasn't here.

Well...whatever. At least, I've temporarily prevented any discussion over the futon.

If Haimaki really were here, it'd just be even more hateful, anyways.

"..."

I re-arranged the things that I had disturbed in my panic just now, sitting down at the wall opposite Reki.

This...is, strangely enough, like a painting. Separated by a gigantic futon, a boy and girl sits apart, on opposite walls. Doesn't this situation make it seem as if we're paying special attention to that

one futon?

(Aw-awkward...)

This is far too awkward.

Did the people who really went through arranged marriages in the past have this kind of feeling too?

Rather, what does Reki plan to do?

It can't be that she can't see this gigantic futon.

But, if you're going to sleep sitting down as always...I'm sorry, but I will be sleeping inside the futon by myself. I'm really sorry about doing this to you. But, let the ulcers come.

"You, that...Do you plan to sit here, holding your gun while sleeping?"

Unable to stand the silence any longer, I started to speak--

-suddenly, I realized that the way I had started speaking might cause an understanding.

What I had said just now seemed as if I was trying to draw Reki in. "Don't sleep that way" → "So, let's get into the futon together." If it were to be misunderstood like that, then I really won't have any way of backing out. I've really done it.

But, it seemed as if I was just adding on to my imagined torments...

"Yes. When the time comes, I have to fend off the enemy--The wind ordered me to do so."

Reki, her head slanted downwards, looking at the tatami, answered me softly.

If you say that...you're going to sleep upright. Alright, alright.

The ball's in my court now.

"The wind's orders, huh. Then, please obey them fully as well."

"Yes. Just..."

"...?"

"The wind has two other orders. And, I haven't fulfilled them yet."

"What orders?"

I couldn't help but frown.

Reki--

-wordlessly, stood up.

"Protect the wind, creating descendants for Ulus."

"Descendants for Ulus...?"

"The child of Kinji-san and I."

"...!"

Th-those words...

Why are they being said again, in this kind of situation...!

Reki, *Footstep, Footstep*, walked onto the futon--

The wood-framed chandelier that was hanging from the ceiling, *Click*, she extinguished it.

Reki's eyes, reflecting the light of the stars that was shining into the room, which had darkened in an instant...*Turn*

...turned towards me.

And as if at that signal, *Thump*...!

The gigantic vase under the painting fell over, and a silver beast appeared from within it.

Ha-Haimaki. That was where you were hiding?

Haimaki-

"Uu...?"

Shuffle. Shuffle

-pushed me forward forcefully, coming to a stop when he had reached Reki's feet.

He-hey. Stop it! Th-this is bad...Ku!

The flow which I had thought we were following, was broken.

Rather than that, in the blink of an eye, I had run into a terrible danger.

Before me, was Reki's soft, supple legs. Behind me, Haimaki's fangs, completely bared.

I mean, I'm not too versed with this kind of thing, but this "overly forceful" approach...normally, the position of the boy and girl should be reversed, right?

"That and--I was given one more order."

Reki suddenly lowered her voice, bending down.

Wh-what is it?

"--protecting Kinji-san."

Saying that--*Thump*

Completely unlike the normal Reki, she shoved me with all her force, pushing me down to the ground.

"...!"

Because of the pillow, I didn't smash my head, but, held tightly by Reki, I had no way of getting up.

Reki was clutching me as if she wanted to use her chest to squash my face--

At the point in time where I was utterly confused, my face reddening.

*Sshhhcc....Sshhccc! Kch!

The sound of something ripping through the air, piercing the paper screen--

And, the sound of breaking glass at the end of the hallway rang out in the midst of the darkness.

"--!?"

Sshhcch!

Kch! Kch! Kch!

The continuous sound of glass crackng.

Bang!...under the impact of multiple bullets, the window fell out of its frame--

Shhchhch Shhhchch!

On top of the TV, Reki's cellphone and my cellphone took direct hits.

And on top of that, the bullet, *Bccch*...!

The broken window, just like a frame, span around, falling down--smashing into the wall.

The silk decorating the walls dropped down like flowing water. The vivid tapestries were ripped off from every direction, covering Reki and I.

"--A snipe."

Hearing Reki's words and not being able to help but turn pale, I,

Clank...*Clank*...! *Clank*...*Clank*...!

-heard the sound of several gunshots coming from the mountain.

That--was the gunshot sound of those snipes.

A sniper rifle's bullets exceed the speed of sound. So, the bullets arrived earlier than the gunshots.

Then, Reki pushing me--was for the sake of preventing me from being hit by those snipes.

But...who is it? Why are they firing? Why are they attacking us!?

"--Remington M700. Distance: 2180m. Fired from the mountain."

Apparently able to judge the opponent's location and gun model merely from the gunshot, Reki said those words calmly.

Upon hearing that number, I could not help but widen my eyes.

(...2180m...!?)

Reki's Killing Range is 2051m.

Among the S ranked Butei in Tokyo Butei High, it was named as the greatest range.

But, the person attacking us appeared to be an elite sniper who was even more skillful than Reki.

Morever, that person was equipped with a Remington M700.

It is the world's most reliable sniper rifle.

"This place is extremely dangerous. The enemy is very clear about our location. Go outside."

Crawling, I extricated myself from underneath Reki, who was covered with the beautiful silk.

The room was filled with feathers, dancing through the air, having flown out of the torn futon.

"Who...is the enemy? Why are they assaulting us!"

Well, in terms of a vague idea...it's not that I'm at a complete loss. The important thing is, this has something to do with I-U.

But if this is one of the remnants of I-U acting, it's too fast.

Reki didn't answer my question, and she swept away the fabric--

Those eyes looked like cameras, embedded into a robot.

With Saori-san, who had called the police, trailing behind us, Reki and I, as well as Haimaki, his fur standing on end, exited from the kitchen door, which should have been in the sniper's blind spot.

At that time, from an unknown location,

"Tohyama Kinji Reki You two Surrender."

(...!?)

This...is the vocaloid that is so popular on the net, that sister-like voice.

Next to me, who had realized that, Reki pointed her Dragunov into the air--

Bang!!

--firing into the night sky.

In the pitch black sky, something akin to small sparks burst forth...

Immediately afterward, a remote-controlled helicopter, painted jet black, fell towards the driveway.

And afterward, from the skies-*Dadadadadadada*

-as if counterattacking Reki, several bullets buried themselves in the ground around us.

"There's more!? --Saori-san! Don't come outside!"

Hurriedly, I pushed Saori-san, who was clutching her cellphone in

her hands, back into the room.

And, exactly as I did that, a bullet pierced through the air, flying towards us. We dodged it by a hair's breadth.

The shots, coming from the air--weren't very accurate. For the sake of keeping silent in order to prevent themselves from being noticed, miniature remote-control helicopters were being used. As such, the gun's recoil prevents them from accurately locking on to their target.

However, there is the saying: 'It only takes one'. Just from the bullets ricocheting off the ground, there was the danger that we would be caught by a stray.

Under the downpour of the rain of bullets, the cars and the asphalt parking lot were pockmarked with gouged-out bullet holes.

"--I am a single bullet--"

--*Bang! Bang! Bang!*

Her sniper rifle pointed into the sky, Reki fired three continuous shots.

From the parking lot, they hurtled into the darkness.

Each one burst into sparks in the air...afterwards, we could see the remote-controlled helicopters, leaving a trail of smoke, fall from the sky.

"If you run the... Saori-san there...break her Ahaha Ahahahahahahaha"

The voice came erratically...but the helicopter announced that it would start firing indiscriminately.

I cannot let Saori-san get dragged into this.

Well, from the beginning, as for planning to run--I had no intention of doing so.

"There are no more helicopters. Let us enter the forest from the hotel's shadow, circling around so we can counterattack."

Reki said, lowering her Dragunov. I nodded...

...but, the enemy's attack had made me even more uncertain.

A machine-synthesized vocaloid. Remote controlled devices armed with sub-machine guns.

This mode of operation. It's indelible.

This is exactly the same as the "Butei Killer"--Riko's attack method when she assaulted us in April!

Although, it could not be Riko.

That was something which exceeded Reki's Killing Range, a snipe from 2180 meters away.

It is a superhuman technique which, with the exception of elite snipers, is impossible for humans to accomplish.

The offender is definitely an expert who has undergone severe sniping training ever since he was a child.

Even if Riko had familiarized herself with sniper rifles, judging from her past, it was impossible that she could have this kind of skill.

Also, she has no reason to attack us...after all, Riko and I are in what amounts to a truce. Furthermore, Riko's target is, "Aria and I", this partnership, not Reki and I.

Added to this--

The name the enemy designated us as, "Reki and I", was also an enigma.

Just now, for a moment, I had suspected that this was an assault from the remnants of I-U, but if it was them...their sights should be locked onto Aria, who was defending Kanzaki Kanae-san, who had been made their scapegoat, or perhaps the person who defeated

Sherlock--me.

Because, in the battle with I-U, Reki was only support. I can't say that they bear absolutely no hatred towards her, however, as for the order of targets, she should be relatively low on the list.

--I don't understand.

Who is this enemy?

Why did you...attack us!?

Reki and I crossed over the parking lot, taking care to keep ourselves hidden in the shadows of the trees--

First, the forest, afterward, we enter the jungle that stretches far behind.

The humidity here is extremely high. The abnormally rugged ground emitted the smell of dirt and rotting leaves.

At the beginning, I was constantly gazing at the uneven ground below my feet...

(...So dark...)

But, once we had gone deep into the jungle, the surroundings were swallowed by darkness.

There was the light from the stars, but it only just managed to pierce the thick jungle canopy.

"Reki. We should--"

-go to a slightly brighter area; before I had finished my sentence--Reki looked back.

Her forefinger was held to her lips, forbidding me from speaking.

...I swallowed my words, approaching her...

Reki stood on her tiptoes, softly whispering into my ear,

"Stay silent. The enemy should have set microphones up. Just now, after Kinji-san alerted the landlady--the enemy said her name."

...Now that she mentions it, that's how it was.

There was never a mention of the landlady's real name on the website, the "Saori" which the vocaloid had uttered.

I nodded--

Following Haimaki's lead, I, along with Reki, strode deeper into the jungle.

But, not fit to this kind of environment, I...felt my breathing become erratic extremely quickly. I had completely lost all sense of direction as well. It was as if I was wandering through the forest, my only guide the faint starlight that pierced through the trees.

And on the contrary, Reki hadn't even taken a deep breath once--it seemed as if she was advancing, a clear objective in her mind.

"Where are you going?"

Lowering my voice, I asked Reki, whose footfalls were near non-existent.

"Judging from the hostile's location when he sniped us, I am estimating his current location--while searching for territory advantageous for my sniping."

"Territory..."

A battle between snipers...I had heard that they were like battles of positioning.

A location where you can see the enemy clearly, yet a location where the enemy cannot do the same, the side that finds such a position, extremely fitting for snipers, gains an overwhelming advantage.

"How is it that you're so clear about this mountain's topography. Our cellphones...are already broken, do you have something like a

GPS with you?"

"There are minor flaws in the output of GPS. My memory is accurate."

"But, you haven't even seen a map of this area, right?"

"Before, on the bus to the hotel, I saw a map of the topography here."

...As expected of an S rank Butei.

The difference from me, who had been looking at a movie website with my cellphone while on the bus, was truly colossal. Apparently, Reki, who had been next to me, had memorized the surroundings' characteristics, a blank look on her face the whole time.

"...?"

Squelch...My feet sunk slightly into the ground.

Only now did I realize, there appeared to be water in front of us.

From the faint sound of running water, I thought that...it was probably a rather shallow river.

I don't know whether she had night vision, but Reki, moving lightly, crossed the river, almost like a water fairy.

Apparently, there were stumps and rocks, and it seemed that she had crossed over above them.

The river was filled with water, and I couldn't let it slow my movements. I recalled the little wilderness combat training I had learned in Assault, and keeping my body low, I kept careful watch of my feet while crossing over the deeper parts of the river. If I do this, then I can more or less make things out in the darkness.

Stepping on the moss-covered rocks and stumps, I somehow managed to make it to the other side of the bank...

Reki, having reached the other side far ahead of me, was standing

next to a gigantic tree, and she was gesturing towards me.

I walked to Reki's side, looking up at the enormous tree, which appeared to be a camphor.

The large, wide trunk was already covered with vines, merging with the ground. I don't really know much about plants, but its age...is probably over 1000. It is the master of the forest.

Is she going to use this tree's branches and trunk to act as cover, initiating the battle?

I'm sorry, master of the forest-san. We're going to drag you into this mess, which reeks of gunpowder.

"Then...What do we do now?"

I pressed myself against the trunk of the colossal tree, drawing the Beretta at my waist, checking its functionality.

Well, there isn't really a use for these in the coming battle--both the gun and me.

"We will lie in wait here, scanning for the enemy. I will look for an opportunity to snipe."

Scanning for the enemy...?

We can't see anything in the midst of this darkness, right? And, the enemy is, like us, on the mountain.

"Kinji-san, please keep your watch."

"...Why?"

"Its fluorescent paint could be noticed by the enemy."

"That's retarded. How can anyone see something like this?"

"I can see it."

Seeing Reki, who never lies, say this with such a serious look, I...couldn't help but swallow my saliva.

The enemy--is someone who holds the same level of skill as Reki, no even more skillful, an elite sniper.

Really, even this kind of tiny light might be seen by him.

"It might be that the enemy is equipping a starlight scope. If so, we will lose the ability to take advantage of the night to surprise him, nor will we be able to see his remote-controlled helicopters, which are painted jet black."

Starlight scope, it's a night-vision scope that can be attached to armaments like sniper rifles.

I had used them once before--

It really is able to make the dark night, only faintly illuminated by the stars, turn into day.

"...Does that have any night-vision capabilities added to it?"

While taking my watch off, I pointed at the Dragunov's scope. *Rustle*

Reki shook her head--

"The only night-vision functionality that this scope has is lighting reticule."

Lighting reticule...an overlayed aiming function, a cross that can be seen when one looks into the scope. Because it is luminous, it can be used at night, a very outdated attachment.

It's better than nothing, but when pitted against starlight scope, it is nearly equivalent to fighting blind.

Frowning, at my feet--

Haimaki's ears stood straight up, twitching slightly.

And, he was staring deep into the dark forest...killing his footfalls, he walked towards it.

"...Hey..."

Reki, staring in the same direction that Haimaki was going, stretched her hand out to stop me, who had called out to him in a small voice.

"..."

...Wh-what is it?

What happened? Don't stay silent, explain this to me.

--*Fwoosh!* Cutting through the air, Haimaki rushed out.

Huuu! That breathing noise--did not come from Haimaki.

"...!?"

In my line of sight, a black dog appeared, charging towards the silver wolf.

That was something I had seen on one of Aria's animal programs, a dog-hunting dog--a Shar-Pei.

It's a species that is used in China as a hunting dog or a military dog, a particularly vicious breed. And, its strain appeared to have been heavily modified, as it was far bigger than the ones I had seen on TV. It looked as if it could easily tear off a man's limb.

"--!"

I hurriedly brought my gun up--*Clank!*

But, my elbow collided with Reki, who had brought her Dragunov up at the exact same time.

Reki, a petite girl, lost her balance, and she leaned against the trunk with one knee.

And, staggering, I--as if trying to push Reki down, fell down on her.

--*Thump!*

(Uu...!)

The frontal impact jarred the Beretta, which was in semi-automatic, and one bullet was released, thudding into the ground.

At that moment--Haimaki and the Shar-Pei had engaged each other, entering a state where we were forced into inaction, unable to shoot. If we fire, there is no guarantee that we will not fatally wound Haimaki.

Standing up, thinking that I should at least fire some shots to intimidate the opponent--Woah.

This time, Reki's legs and my legs were tangled, and I fell against the trunk once again.

"...!"

What the hell am I doing.

Damn it.

Reki and I--have never really fought together like this.

Because, when we had worked together in Assault, Reki always acted as long-range support. Battling together with her in this kind of close-contact fighting...had only ever occurred during the Odaiba casino security detail.

So, there is no coordination between us.

(Right now...if it was Aria...!)

In my mind--Aria's image, charging towards the dogs without any thought whatsoever, using the flat of her blade to start beating the enemy down, appeared. At that point, because she'd be unable to halt her momentum, she'd definitely strike Haimaki a few times. And I, standing on the side, would use the vines to bind the powerless dog, capturing it. If it was Aria, I felt that that kind of combination would be possible.

--*Bang! Bang!*

Reki, still being crushed by me, extended her Dragunov to the side,

firing.

"!"

The empty casing which flew into the air before me, as well as the unique metallic clack of the Dragunov, forced me to slam my eyes shut.

When I had opened them again...

The black dog had suddenly weakened considerably.

"--Haimaki, let that dog go. Stop fighting."

Hearing Reki, who was below me, give him an order, Haimaki--kicked off the dirt with a thud, retreating.

Keeping some distance away from that dog, *Grrrrrrrr...*, he growled threateningly.

That black dog...limping all the while...ran away.

"...Did you hit?"

"Yes. The bullet grazed both his legs."

"That dog...probably ran back to its master. Like this, our hiding place will be exposed. I'm not trying to say that you should have killed it, but is it really fine..?"

"Our location was already noticed by the enemy when Kinji-san fired. So, I fired as well."

..I-I see. The accidental discharge when I fell just now has already exposed our position?

Because, the enemy really has microphones set up. That's probably it.

To Reki, I'm really a dead weight.

"Please do not concern yourself. That dog is very powerful. Haimaki wanted to clamp down on the dog's throat, not allowing it to bark,

and afterward, he wished to use his claws to rake what appears to be a transmitter off the dog's body, but--Haimaki was unable to do so immediately. If the dog stayed abnormally still, the enemy would have turned his attention this way."

"Transmitter..."

I never saw such a thing...is that how it was?

I turned my head, looking at Haimaki, who was staggering back, exhausted...he was injured.

During the fight with the Shar-Pei, he appeared to have been bitten in several places. That beautiful silver fur was flecked with crimson blood.

It appears that this confirms Reki's words. That battle dog was quite strong.

Added to this, ringing out from inside the forest, as if reporting that it had already found us--a dog's howl. Probably the one from just now. It was vicious and chilling, a sound that easily inspired fear in people's hearts.

"...We should change our position, right? We've already been exposed, so it's pretty dangerous here."

Just about to move, I--

-had my belt,*Tug*, grabbed by Reki.

"You cannot move."

"...Why?"

My eyebrows furrowed.

Reki took out a box filled with Calorie Mate energy bars from her pocket...and with a click, she opened it.

Emptying its contents, she filled it with the earth by her feet.

"...What are you doing?"

Not turning towards me, Reki-*Fwoosh*

-threw the dirt-filled Calorie Mate box away from the tree.

--*Clank*--!!

The box burst open, the dirt inside showering down.

That scene made a chill run down my back.

It had been sniped. And, it was a box roughly the size of my palm.

"The moment we step to the right or left of this tree, we will be sniped. We cannot move."

...*Bang*...

Immediately after Reki's words, the sound of a gunshot reached us from afar.

"As predicted, the enemy has not left the location he was occupying when he first attacked the hotel. The distance is 2050m, and as such, he is in range."

"...From 2050 meters...he is a sniper that is able to snipe that box from such a distance, huh?"

There's nothing we can do. At least, there's nothing *I* can do.

In this battle, I can only be a burden.

"...He's really a powerful enemy. I have no idea what kind of person he might be."

"The enemy is certainly an expert in sniping. As for his personality, it is overflowing with confidence."

"...You can understand the enemy's personality?"

"Because, the enemy sniped the box. That is meant to express that, even if his position is known, he will not lose, a challenge to his opponent."

"..."

"At the same time, the enemy has shown that he puts a lot of trust in new technology. He is a very adaptable person."

"--I can't believe you know so much. But, what does it matter if you're able to deduce the opponent's traits? A battle of sniping is but a battle of marksmanship, right?"

"A battle between snipers is done by reading the opponent's characteristics, and using that as a basis, deciding upon the method of attack."

"Characteristics...?"

I have no idea what use that might hold in a battle...

And, not being clear about this point means that, for this battle, I cannot help in the slightest.

...I have no choice.

Then, Haimaki and I will sharpen our gaze, looking out, seeing whether that hunting dog returns.

I sighed, sitting down on the trunk--

"--This will become a drawn-out battle. Please eat."

Reki took one of the Calorie Mates which she had emptied just now, handing it over.

...I see. Now I know why Reki only ever eats these.

This is like a wilderness ration. For the sake of being able to respond to these wars of attrition, Reki carries this kind of nutritious food at all times.

As expected of a girl who is ready to fight whether she is walking, sitting, or even sleeping.

I started thinking outside the box, and I asked Reki whether we could escape, running directly backwards from the tree...but the words had scarcely left my mouth before they were denied.

But, that was normal, since this is a forest.

As long as I move left or right even the slightest bit, just for the sake of avoiding a tree or rock, my head will suffer the same fate as that box.

The safe zone only extends from this tree to the river. As such, Reki and I ate the Calorie Mates, scooping up some river water to drink....

Staying by the trunk of the tree, unmoving.

...10 minutes...30 minutes...1 hour...

Nothing...happened. We just waited. Both us, and the enemy.

2 hours...3 hours.

The time was 0:00.

Right now, it's the season of passage between summer and autumn, but as time dragged on, the forest air was becoming colder and colder.

Our body heat slowly being stolen by the frigid air, our strength was being sapped as well. And, not only was our body affected, but drowsiness soon fell upon us. Quietly sitting in the darkness, I felt exhaustion come upon me...and, forcing oneself to stay awake is a large test of willpower.

I understood, my own willpower was fading, along with the passage of time.

Until now--in all the battles that I had fought with offenders...

I had been able to see the enemy.

Even if the enemy hid himself, all I needed to do was to force him out of hiding with my pistol.

Although, the offender we're facing this time is a sniper. An unseen enemy. And, this isn't like the battle with Reki, where I had been running everywhere, but this was a war of attrition which had already been dragged on for several hours.

Humans cannot maintain a state of agitation for that long a period.

However, I needed to keep myself in that state.

Because, once that was interrupted--My life would be put in danger.

...Fuck.

(This too...is a battle, huh...)

I had never experienced this kind of battle before. To be honest, I was about to reach my limit.

And even now, I wanted to--test my luck, charging out of cover, running away from this place.

On the contrary, Reki...completely still, was staring at me, who was in this state.

Haimaki licked his wounds, his face fatigued.

We still can't act...We still can't act!?

Like this, when time had passed into the deep night--

"..."

Reki made her move.

She slipped the bayonet out from under her skirt, affixing it to the Dragunov...

And, she took off the scarf of her uniform, releasing a soft sound of

rubbing fabric, placing it on the tip of the bayonet edge.

"...If you want to make a white flag, I'll lend you my shirt."

Reki glanced at me, who was struggling to keep his eyes open, joking...

Rustle...She extended the scarf to the side of the tree.

A gust of wind washed over it, and the scarf danced in the air, slightly outside the tree.

Shhchh! Shhchh!

The scarf had been torn past at high speed by something--by a bullet.

A few seconds later, the echo of two gunshots reached our ears from afar.

--The opponent fired.

The enemy's concentration was amazing, he had been staring this way for three and a half hours.

"...Did he fire from the same location?"

"Yes. He should not have moved from the location he attacked the hotel. I'm afraid that, securing the mechanical advantage of starlight scope and having set up several microphones, he has no intention of leaving that position."

"He doesn't care even if we know where he is? Then, he really is very confident."

"That is probably correct. The signal that I had released was returned to me unflinchingly."

"Signal?"

"The exhibition of technique. On each of that hunting dog's legs, I left a 3cm long, 3mm deep, 3cm high wound, exactly the same on

both legs.

A-a completely identical wound...? Furthermore, she's able to control its shallowness to such a degree that the dog can still walk?

I can't do that even while in Hysteria Mode. Probably.

Al...although I've been shocked at your strangeness up till now...exactly how much of a genius are you?

Rustle. On the bulletproof scarf that Reki opened up for me to see...there was an X-shaped hole which was probably caused by the two bullets from before.

Those two obliquely angular lines...their length was exactly the same. Each one was about 30 centimeters long.

--"I can do even this."

The enemy is sending that kind of signal, right?

"What do we do? Do we just last till daylight...I don't know if they'll come, but should we wait here for the police to come up the mountain to investigate?"

Reki shook her head.

"We would not be able to do it. The enemy is in a hurry to decide his victory."

Stare. She said, turning her eyes to the forest. It seemed...that there was something there again.

"Kinji-san. Please use me, and go into HSS--Hysteria Mode."

Wh...?

What...did you say?

"No matter what the result of this battle is, the you as of now cannot escape from this forest."

"...Wa-wait. Hysteria Mode...you...I don't know where you found

this information, but seeing as you know, I'll tell you. If I am to go into Hysteria Mode, I have to..."

Suddenly telling me that crazy battle plan, Reki cut off my words.

"--I will not mind no matter what you do to me. Because it's you."

She said, her grip loosening on the scarf in her hands.

The rouge colored scarf, fluttering in the midst of the darkness, seemed to imply some sort of deep meaning--and slowly, it fell towards Reki's feet.

"We are nearly out of time, are you able to do it?"

Thud...Reki pressed herself against the gigantic tree trunk.

Staying like that, unmoving, she stared directly at me.

"Time...?"

"After this, I will commence an exchange of shots with the enemy."

"...!"

"If I die or am injured, please leave me. If that time comes, please bring back the scope on this gun. Hidden inside this is a camera, it has already been set to record the scene at the instant that I snipe--You can use this to confirm the enemy's appearance."

"Hey..."

Facing Reki, who was able to state her purpose so coolly despite the fact that she knew she might die, I couldn't hide the tremor that ran through my body.

However, Reki, as if there was no time to answer, continued,

"On my body, there are 3 DAL for sniper rifle use."

--Butei Bullets.

Different from normal bullets, they are special modified bullets that

are only circulated among elite Butei.

All of them are handmade by professional bullet craftsman, the price of one cannot fall lower than 1 million yen...Other than the Grenade and Flash that Nii-san gave me on I-U, there were many different types, such as Flare or Cannon.

But, Reki, you brought those kinds of things with you to travel?

"In a while, I will fire two DAL. For the third shot, I will use a Russian bullet, and when I've finished--we will start to leave this place."

Scarcely telling me what I needed to know, Reki ejected the magazine from her Dragunov.

From its contents, she took out two bullets--*Click Click*

-and she slotted in two other bullets that she had taken out from her breast pocket.

They were probably attack-type Butei Bullets.

"Kinji-san. Quickly go into HSS...Hysteria Mode--We have no time left."

I hesitated.

A few seconds later...

Reki closed those wise eyes.

As if saying--that I was "useless".

"Then, we shall change our plan. We are already at a dangerous distance. I will definitely take care of the enemy. After that, please go into Hysteria Mode...running away from here."

Reki, not caring whether I approved of her plan, pressed her back against the tree--

"...I am a single bullet."

-she softly recited those mantra-like words.

"A bullet has no heart. As such, it does not think."

That voice is something that I had gotten used to hearing when she had acted as support, sniping--

"It just flies towards its target."

At that moment, I didn't know why, but a sense of unease sprung up in my chest.

--Reki---

Flutter--Her skirt fluttering, turning her Dragunov to the right, Reki--

-flickered out to the side of the tree, her gun held ready.

Bang!

She fired without a moment's hesitation, and immediately, Reki turned left, returning behind the tree.

As if grazing past Reki, *Shhhchhh!* , the bullet of the enemy's counterattack hurtled out of the darkness.

...!

I didn't truly understand what had happened in that instant, but...wh-what was that!

Just now, that was truly amazing.

The enemy had fired the instant he saw Reki.

The two sides are around two kilometers away from each other....the muzzle velocity of the M700 with 7.62mm NATO bullets that he was using, was 840 meters per second.

The time between the shot and its impact is around 2.5 seconds.

In that 2.5 seconds, Reki had aimed at the enemy, who was

enveloped by the darkness, fired, and returned to the safe zone behind the tree.

As I realized what had happened, stunned--

Pch...!

Light glared out, coming from the direction of the forest. Almost as if lightning had struck.

(Flash...!)

Just now, Reki's attack--appeared to be the same as the one I had used in I-U, the bullet that brought a blinding light to life.

The enemy's surroundings have definitely been lit up like a day at the height of summer.

Continuing, Reki performed the same movement--flashing out to the side of the tree.

Bang!

The second shot...

--*GIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIN*--!!

"Uu...!"

From the depths of the forest, a high-pitched blast, which seemed to shake the ground even here, rang out.

--Cannon.

Normally used to disrupt the enemy's battle ability, it is a Butei Bullet that creates massive amounts of sound pressure.

(Reki...)

--I understand.

I understand what Reki wanted to do.

The first shot, Flash, was directed against starlight scope.

That type of night-vision attachment, amplifying the light of the stars umpteen times, was extremely weak against strong light.

A scope that faced that way would probably undergo 'white out'--or otherwise the safety function would engage, momentarily forcing a shutdown of all functionality.

With this, Reki followed through with her second shot, Cannon, firing at the enemy, who had lost his sight.

The enemy had used microphones, which amplified all sound, setting them up all around us. And, if he's wearing something like headphones to listen to their input, his hearing would definitely be damaged from the sonic-boom.

"--The enemy sniper has reached for his ears in pain. He is a solitary killer, he has no observers."

Looking into her scope, Reki reported these facts, like a scientist examining a guinea pig.

(...I see...)

--In a battle between snipers, the two sides read each other's personalities, deciding their method of attack.

That was what had happened here.

The overconfident enemy had responded to Reki's provocation. And, from that behaviour, Reki was able to recognize the enemy's position in an instant.

Additionally, the enemy is also someone who relies a lot on machines. Setting up a location which he could not move from easily, he put too much faith in them.

Reki specifically targeted this specific point--using light and sound, she assaulted the enemy's machine-heightened eyes and ears.

And now, she held the enemy's life and death in her hands.

We won...

"The enemy--is a little girl. Younger than me."

The sniper over there is a girl as well--and moreover, she's younger than you?

It's unbelievable, but...these are Reki's words. They must be true.

"Shoot to kill?"

Towards Reki, who was saying this as confirmation, I immediately replied with: "No, respect Butei Law."

"Then, I shall break the enemy's weapon."

Bang!

Immediately after Reki sniped at the enemy, her gun emitting a sharp muzzle flash--

(...?)

Bch! BchBch!

Small dots of light scattering about her, she seemed to be in pain, as if she had been struck. Reki's skirt, as if dancing in place, spun a semicircle, fluttering up, before it fell down.

Drip, Drip The sound of a certain liquid falling to Reki's feet reached my ears.

"Reki...?"

...!?

What...happened?

Her appearance is extremely strange. Was she counterattacked?

No. The enemy should have had her battle ability ripped from her, she shouldn't be able to do anything.

Even if she had been sniped, I would have heard a gunshot, but none came.

"..."

Reki raised her gun again, aiming towards a location slightly different from before...and one step, two steps, she retreated.

"..."

Silently--she lowered her gun.

In that state, she placed the stock of her gun against the ground, and while she appeared to be using it to support herself...

Scrape...Scrape...

...she sat down, unable to move.

"...Ah...Hey...!"

I immediately crouched down, supporting Reki, whose head was drooping down--

"...!'

She's injured...! When!?

In the darkness, I fumbled around, trying to find Reki's wound, copious amounts of blood were flowing out.

Her upper head was heavily wounded, as well as her forearm and left thigh.

In that instant just now, what on Earth was she counterattacked by? I don't understand...

Pressing down on Reki's wounds with a frantic desperation, I, *OOOOooOOoo...! UoOOOooooOO...!*

-suddenly heard the sound of several howls, all around us, continuously echoing out from within the forest.

Those voices were similar to the Shar-Pei's that came earlier. And...there were 10...No, 20 sets of them.

I see. It was because they were surrounding us, that Reki was so eager to decide the battle.

"Kinji-san. This..."

Reki handed her Dragunov and bayonet over to me.

Drip, Drip. Blood was still flowing down her forehead and elbows, dripping off of her.

"Regrettably, I have been injured. I no longer have the strength to drive those hunting dogs away, protecting you. After this, please protect yourself, and run away alone. The enemy will definitely regain her composure in short order...and she will come to perform the final blow."

"What are you saying? Since that's the case, it's even more clear that this is a path that we cannot take! How can I leave you here, alone and unarmed?"

I pushed the Dragunov back towards her.

"I have one more Grenade left. It can be detonated even without a gun."

Said Reki, taking the third, the final, Butei Bullet from her breast pocket.

Understanding the meaning of her words, I...clenched my teeth.

--Do you wish to commit suicide?

Do you wish to go down the path of killing yourself and the enemy!?

"Stop saying such idiotic things...!"

"Kinji-san, hurry. The enemy's net is closing in, and soon, you will no longer be able to escape."

Having lost too much blood, not even able to lift her head up, Reki--was still trying to hurry me, who was crouching there, not willing to stand up.

"I failed. I was weaker than the enemy. The weak will be devoured by the strong. This is the natural law of the world."

This...certainly, might be the truth.

"This is very logical, Kinji-san. If you linger any further, both of us will be killed. As such, it is better if you yourself live."

This too...might be the truth.

"Kinji-san...there is no need to worry about me. I live the life that the wind has determined, and I shall die in the same manner. That is of no importance to me."

People--whether they be few or many, live by the rules that have been determined for them.

Whether it be a delusion or something else, the "wind" is the rule in Reki's life. Just like a normal person's society, as well as their laws.

So, Reki has been respecting those rules since she was born, and it is certainly possible that she will follow them till her death.

--But.

"Reki...dying in this kind of place, dying by the hands of an unknown person...Isn't this a worthless death...!? Don't always listen to the "wind's" orders, never laughing, never even crying...dying with no emotion, dying with no feeling, this is too...!"

I knelt by Reki's side. Reki--

Rustle.

Her hair shaking, she shook her head.

"Kinji-san. Yesterday...I said that I 'had no emotions'. But, actually...I do not know why I did not tell you then...I...once, had a

very clear emotion..."

"...Reki..."

"The 'wind'...ordered me, it ordered me to take a boy...to take a powerful boy and bring him into Ulus. And when the 'wind'--ordered me to become Kinji-san's everything...in my heart...for the first time, I had my own...I had my own, true feelings."

Reki...

"--I'm so glad that Kinji-san is the one.--"

An emotion had sprouted within you.

You may not have been able to convey it through your expression or behaviour, but in your heart...an emotion, only belonging to you, had been brought to life.

Drip, Drip Her blood trickling down without pause, Reki said,

"So, Kinji-san, I will not die without any emotion. You...don't have to feel sadness for me inside...the responsibility of keeping the line of Ulus eternal, now lies with my sisters."

Reki...!

"I, have no regrets. I can, with the person who first created emotion within me...eat a meal with you, I can travel with you, I can receive clothes from you. It may not have been long, I may not have been able to...express it within this period of time...but, that is definitely an emotion...I...am very happy...the last two weeks that I have spent with you, those days were filled with joy..."

Reki said, raising her bloodstained face.

That face--

Ahh, it was, for the first time...

--Smiling--

She smiled.

This is probably Reki wanting to make me relieved.

"Reki..."

That beautiful, unblemished face--made me feel as if, in an instant, I had understood Reki.

It isn't that Reki doesn't have emotions.

She just doesn't understand what emotion is.

Just that, her heart hasn't developed yet. Exactly like a child.

And, the reason it was so difficult to go into Hysteria Mode from Reki, was also because...in my heart, I had a faint feeling that she was still a child.

Reki.

The enemy is approaching. We will fight for an instant.

You cannot fight anymore. You yourself said very clearly for me to leave you behind.

And I...only have to run away. By myself.

"Kinji-san...please go...it's already..."

Reki's voice was losing all strength, but even in that state, she was calmly hurrying me on...

I slipped the bayonet into my belt, and I shouldered the Dragunov.

"Reki. As opposed to two people dying, it is certainly better for one to live."

Hearing my words--

Reki, as if relieved, lightly nodded.

You don't even have the strength to answer anymore.

"Yet--my math isn't very good, but at least, I can understand that that isn't the best answer."

"...?"

Reki's eyes, under her bloodstained locks, looked at me.

Rustle.

Putting strength into my arms, I lifted Reki's arm.

"Obviously, it is better if both can live."

I helped her stand up, and Reki's--

-almond eyes were slightly wider than usual, staring directly at me.

It was extremely slight, but she had an amazed expression.

That's good, Reki. That's good.

Doing this, you have to find yourself.

From this moment onward, let your life be filled with more surprise. With more tears. And--with more, more smiles.

That kind of smile, shown to me while sitting in the midst of a puddle of your own blood--

-your first and last smile...That isn't fine at all!

"Reki. You cannot. You cannot die. I saw it. At this moment, you--smiled. You can smile."

Reki--this is the moment where you start to grow.

In this situation, where you've taken your first step, you cannot die.

From now onward. For what comes after.

You are no longer the wind's slave--you are a human, a new life.

Therefore, you cannot die!

Reki seemed to start trying to resist...but immediately, she lost all strength, and while standing, she swayed dangerously.

She can't. Reki can no longer walk.

The Dragunov slung around my back, I took Reki with my two hands before--holding her up, princess-style.

It's a relief that this girl is so light. Because of that, I'm able to run. Relying on the strength that comes when one is in the midst of a firestorm.

Tap Tap Tap...!

The hunting dogs had already reached a point where I could hear their footsteps.

While holding Reki, I wasn't able to fire off any intimidation shots, and I had no idea as to where to escape--when from my feet.

Whisper...

A white shadow flickered out.

--Haimaki.

Having been injured earlier in the fight with the Shar-Pei, Haimaki was standing up.

Grrrrrrr...Growling softly, Haimaki's fur was standing up, and although he was in the darkness, I was able to see that his fangs and claws were extended.

His back facing me, running towards the forest, Haimaki--is an extremely faithful wolf.

That blind faith was always there, a willingness to die for his master. Even when he had been struck by Patra's hideous golems, even when he was pursuing me, acting as the platform for Reki's ricochet, those positions of enormous danger.

And now, even now, he was like this.

Haimaki. You...

...are going to volunteer to be our bait?

By yourself, you're going to challenge that entire pack of ferocious hunting dogs?

You too--are a man.

It matters not whether you're a human or an animal. When in times of need, men...have no choice but to help women. Even if one is to die, it is something that one must do.

Only turning his head back halfway, Haimaki's eyes, gleaming in the darkness, looked at me.

Those eyes had faith in me--

Go. I leave Reki to you.

They seemed to be saying that.

"--Haimaki. When you survive and come back, I'll buy a box of fish sausages for you."

Saying that, I--

-turned my back on Haimaki, already surrounded by the countless

gleaming eyes of the hunting dogs in the darkness by his side--

-I turned my back on Haimaki, who howled, bursting into the midst of the pack like a hurricane.

Facing the hunting dogs which had bundled up, preparing to savage Haimaki together, I held Reki's delicate frame in my hands, rushing towards the river--

Run.

I have to run.

I have to run with all my strength.

Still holding Reki, who was completely still, in my arms, I ran. Into the forest. Recklessly.

The me as of now isn't in anything like Hysteria Mode. The me as of now is just a normal high school student.

However, I still have the ability to carry a girl in my arms, running away. I can still turn my back on the enemy, running away with all my strength.

Besides, Reki--I had run away from you during the "Manhunt", and normally, I run away from Aria as well. Running away is the only field in which I have a wealth of experience. So, don't worry.

Having crossed over a few muddy creeks, my limbs scratched as I hurtled through the dense branches, having slid down steep slopes, my body stained with mud, covered with wounds, I still ran, despite being in this state. I had emptied my mind of all thought.

In the midst of the mountain, Haimaki is probably still fighting with the hunting dogs, preventing them from going after us.

Or perhaps, because I had crossed through many rivers, it was hard to track me? The dogs--had not given chase. It seemed as if they had retreated.

Continuing to run deep inside, my breathing erratic, my vision suddenly opened--

-I exited into a vast field where cosmos was growing abundantly.

Under the light of the stars, the pink color of the petals, all blooming simultaneously, seemed like a haze of pink.

"Reki...Reki!"

While entering into the midst of the cosmos in the field, parting their branches, I called out her name, trying to confirm whether she was conscious or not, but...

Reki could no longer answer.

I understood that the temperature in her limbs was already dropping.

"...Reki..."

Panicked, in an instant, I placed Reki into the midst of the cosmos--and pulling out the wire in my belt, I cut it with the cutter on my belt. Using it, I stopped the blood flow to her thigh and forearm.

Because I had ascertained that Reki was still breathing, I raised my head, looking around. There was not a single house around. Not even the tiniest home. At any rate, we cannot contact a hospital.

Aah, if my cellphone hadn't been damaged in the very first attack...

I could have called in reinforcements for support, called in ambulances, called in anything.

There were no lights around us. I had no idea where the city was. I had ran directly away from the enemy, but...it could be that I had ran in the opposite direction from the city.

At that moment--

Flutter.

Flutter.

A butterfly...flew into my field of vision.

Appearing to be a swallowtail butterfly, it flew in small circles before us, and as if guiding us--it started flying in a certain direction.

Heading in that direction, at the forest on the other side of the swamp--

Shine. I saw a light. Squinting, looking closer, the lights...continued.

Most likely, that's a streetlight.

If I head over there, a car will probably pass. Then, I will be able to ask for help.

But, aahh...

It's so far...! To the point of despair.

(Reki...you cannot die...!)

Once again taking Reki into my arms, I stood up, focusing all the strength in my body into my legs.

Reki, you cannot die.

I have finally reached this point, I have finally understood you.

Just the slightest bit...I can understand you.

So--there is still something that I need to tell you.

Something I haven't told you yet.

So, you cannot die.

You cannot die, Reki!

Go For The NEXT! Reki

Running, running, exiting onto the highway, I--

-collapsed, my knees thudding into the ground, laying Reki down onto the asphalt.

"Haa, haa, haa...!"

My head was spinning, my breathing laboured.

--I'm at my limit. I cannot run any further.

From the beginning, my body had been weakening as I spent longer and longer in the woods. And, that body had continued carrying somebody, no matter how elfin they might be, as it ran. Furthermore, going through those pathless locations, my body had gone into completely and total exhaustion.

I pressed my hands to the road, breathing heavily.

And...*Flutter, Flutter.*

The butterfly, which had been dancing in the field of cosmos earlier, had somehow, reached here first...and flitting around me as if it was worried, it flew to my left hand.

Having large, white wings, it, with a design just like a swallowtail--had a star-shaped pattern on them.

I felt that I had seen this design somewhere before, but...this isn't the time to investigate.

(--I'm fine with whatever, but will a car...come--?)

If one came, I'd use my Butei License to slow it, and then bring Reki to a hospital.

The hill-road that leads to the city has a very large curve, making it impossible to see it due to the trees and topography...and now, it

didn't feel as if there was a car nearby.

Damn it...I have no other choice.

One minute. In just one minute, I forced my legs up again, waiting for a car.

If a car does not come, I will carry Reki once again, running down the road.

Deciding that, I--took off the Dragunov that was slung over my back, and I looked into the scope.

I cannot let even one minute go to waste. Just now, Reki's words...

"Hidden inside this is a camera. It has already been set to record the scene at the instant that I snipe."

Recalling them, I fumbled with the scope...and on the bottom, I pressed a slim button.

I peered into the scope, redundantly pushing the button. The telescope function disappeared from my sight, replaced by the image of a black remote-controlled helicopter.

This is...the video of the helicopter that Reki had shot when it attacked us at the hotel, right?

I pressed the same button repeatedly. *Click Click*

After the screen flickered through four helicopters, the image changed into that of the shot at the black dog's leg.

After that, the video that I saw, the video that replaced the image of the dog's right and left legs--

(--!)

My heart skipped a beat.

Flash, Cannon, Russian--what was pictured inside the three photos of the time of release of the three bullets...was, as Reki had said, a

girl.

And she too--seemed familiar.

She had black twin-tails, around the same length as Aria's. She was wearing the same extravagant Chinese clothing as when she had attacked me.

This is...the transfer student from Hong Kong Butei High.

"...Koko...!"

This isn't a mistake.

It may be that the videos were rather dark, but in all three, her whole body was clearly captured.

That little girl who had ambushed me by the road on the day of the opening ceremony, Koko--charged out of the camouflage of leaves, quickly mounting the offroad-bike behind her, a CRM250AR.

(Koko...the person who put me in submission by grappling when I was in Hysteria Mode, the person who drew with Aria in Aru＝Kata--)

--and in sniping, she was a match for Reki...wasn't she...?

That kind of girl exists in this world?

No, can they exist in this world?

Martial arts, guns, and sniping. All of these techniques take many years to reach their ultimate form. At our age...no, at an age below that, it's impossible for someone to be a master at two, or three things.

"The Warrior of Ten-Thousand Techniques--"**Ten-Thousand Arms**"...Koko..."

As I murmured the second name she had given--

From the left...coming from the mountain, I heard the sound of an

engine.

Ha Raising my head, I stood up, thinking that a car was coming.

--*Beeeeep*

Afterward, hearing the sound of a siren...

--*Beeeeeeeeeep*...!

"...!"

...I whipped out my Beretta.

She's different from the one in legend. Well, I'm just talking to myself right now.

--That was the sound of a motorcycle.

It had a high pitch which even an amateur would understand from listening, the sound of a 2-stroke engine.

It was the sound of the bike in the video, the engine equipped by a CRM250AR.

It's impossible that the same bike would pass by coincidentally, because 2-stroke motorcycles exceed exhaust limits, and their gas, as well as the motorcycles themselves, are no longer in production.

As I deduced this, sitting on the bike that was banking furiously around the curve--was Koko.

"Koko!"

I stood in a position where I could protect Reki, bringing my Beretta up to bear--

"Kihi!"

Damn it! Laughing while swerving in an S-shape, Koko could not be held within my sights.

The next instant, Koko slammed down on the brakes, brushing past

me as if trying to sweep me over.

"--!"

Twisting my head back, I...could not ready my gun.

Because, stopping the bike in a slanted position a few meters away, Koko was pointing a gun at me.

That was a suppressed UZI--a sub-machine gun.

This situation...

Koko has the advantage in terms of magazine capacity, and moreover, she was a person that was able to match Aria in a gunfight. Facing her was me, not even in Hysteria Mode, and added to that, I had to protect Reki, who was heavily wounded, while fighting.

--I don't want to admit it, but I cannot act.

"Drop your pistol. The DE at your chest too."

Wave, Wave. The barrel of Koko's gun pointed at my ribs, I, compelled to do so, dropped the Beretta--as well as the Desert Eagle that I had not used yet, having no other choice.

"Reki--90 points. She's a good piece, so I'll take it. And as expected, Kinchi gets 0 points. But, he's a piece with a good military record. I like it. I'll bring him back."

"...Take...what are you saying?"

Keeping my body completely still, I directed those words at Koko, staring at her.

"From now on, all *ability users* have to be destroyed. It's good to keep people like you, "just humans, yet strong pieces," in my grasp."

"...?"

"And, Reki is one of the **northern barbarians**, Kinchi is one of the

eastern tribesmen. You're fitting as soldiers of the queen of the center of the world, Koko."[14]

I...have no idea what she's talking about. What the hell is she saying?

Please go learn Japanese again.

I made a confused expression, and Koko, going *Fufu*, snickered, looking at me.

"Become part of my collection, alright? Do you know who **Koko**, or **Meng De** is? Koko is of his bloodline."[15]

"...I have no idea."

"Cao Cao Meng De."

"...Aah."

"--I won't forgive you for that weak reaction!"

Pffft!

Quickly becoming angry, Koko fired a warning shot into the air--

Once again returning the barrel of the gun to my body, she seemed as if she was going to give some sort of order...at that moment.

"...!"

Suddenly realizing something, she started the bike again, *Vroom!* Koko spun in place, turning around completely.

Brushing past Koko's twin-tails, in front of me--

--*Shiiing!*

-along with the sound of a bell, an arrow sped past.

Koko put the motorcycle into action, dodging the arrow.

From the direction that the arrow came from...I could see a wine-

red car cut through the air, hurtling this way.

It was around 150 meters away.

(...That is...!)

On the engine bonnet of the convertible--there was someone kneeling on one knee.

Even from such a long distance, I realized it.

The gold forehead protector on her head, her body clothed with red and white Miko garments, its sleeves rolled up, a nocked bow in her hands--A Hotogi Armed Miko. However, it was not Shirayuki.

Kyoto has a Hotogi shrine as well. It seemed that they were reinforcements from there.

That butterfly just now...as if welcoming them, flew over, its wings fluttering.

Seeing this scene, I suddenly thought back to it.

That butterfly is a Hotogi Swallowtail.

When I was a child, I had seen them being raised at the Hotogi shrine in Aomori.

Creak Creak...Hyuu--!

The intrepid Miko used a daikyu , over 2 meters long, to shoot two arrows.

Shhaang! That bell rang out again, as if exorcising something, the eagle-feathered arrow penetrating the motorcycle that Koko was using as her shield, making a hole in the fuel tank.

--Amazing. From that kind of distance, on top of a swaying car...without using any sights, she managed to hit the gasoline tank with an arrow from a daikyuu.

PftPftPft!

Counterattacking with a number of bullets from the Uzi, Koko immediately jumped onto the motorcycle--

"In every generation, Koko has always run when the time came to run. It's fine as long as I have the last laugh. **Farewell**."

Leaving a trail of gasoline behind and swerving off the road, she disappeared into the thick undergrowth.

I picked up Reki's Dragunov, trying to snipe her with my amateur skills...but it was impossible. I could no longer see Koko.

The engine noise continued to get further and further.

She--really knows how to adapt to the situation.

This kind of calm, collected, hit and run type...from my experience, is very strong.

I went "Tch", turning towards Reki--

The car just now--a high-grade Mitsuoka automatic car, a wine-red Himiko--had stopped. The Miko on the bonnet, a bow in her hands, was looking towards the mountain, still alert.

Sitting on the seat was the beautiful driver that had come to pick up Konayuki last month--

"...Kin-chan! What happened...!?"

Pointing at the Hotogi Swallowtail was Shirayuki.

"Shirayuki...you really saved us. I'm glad you noticed."

"Because we heard a noise like Cannon from the mountain, I had a bad feeling in my heart...so, I used Koujutsu[16] to investigate. Also, because I couldn't connect with Kin-chan's cellphone...I-I, feh...."

Climbing out of the car, her eyes filled with tears, Shirayuki embraced me tightly, as if trying to confirm if I was alright.

Immediately noticing Reki, lying on the floor, Shirayuki said: "Oh

no...!", kneeling by Reki's side.

"Reki--was beaten by that girl from earlier. We have to go to a hospital immediately--"

I said that, and next to Shirayuki, who had clasped her hands to her mouth, her eyes wide open,

"Reki...?"[17]

The other Miko, getting off the car, said something in a small voice, kneeling down.

Already having become a beautiful woman, I didn't recognize her for a moment, but...this girl is...Kazayuki.

One of Shirayuki's sisters. One year younger.

Before, she was a very cool girl, able to match Reki. She hadn't changed at all.

Having just been fighting with arrows, even though she saw Reki, soaked in blood, before her...her expression did not change at all.

Expressionless, Kazayuki whispered something into Shirayuki's ear--

"...N-no way. Are you sure that isn't a mistake?"

Shirayuki turned towards her, stunned.

Nod. Nodding, Kazayuki...

...said something that I did not wish to hear, the true identity of my fiancé--coolly, she announced it.

"This is the descendant of both--Minamoto no Yoshitsune and Genghis Khan. The princess of the continent."

Go For The Next!

Afterword

Best of luck, Hidan no Aria anime!

Everyone can finally watch Aria come to life on the television screen!

Kinji, Shirayuki, Riko, and Reki's movements are similarly animated![18] Hear them speak! We did it, didn't we, Haimaki?

Thanks to all the readers who shared their appreciation online, all those who frequently send character fanart via postcard, and finally all those who've shown their support by buying this volume of Hidan no Aria. It's thanks to all of you that Aria and the other characters are having life breathed into them.

Really, honestly, thank you for all your support.

Please continue to show your support for our characters!

On another note, coinciding with the release of this volume is the release of the first volume of the Comic Alive-serialized manga of Hidan no Aria!

This is a must-have reference for any fan of the series. You'll find yourself exclaiming, "Oh, so *that's* what that scene was like!" Enjoy anew the world of Hidan no Aria;

I, too, will be buying a copy, both as an author and a fan!

-Now, enough about that. Let's get to our Hidan no Aria Q&A segment!

At the end of volume five, I asked everyone for their questions about this work, and have received many, many submissions! This makes me so happy! Allow me to choose one to respond to.

Q: Why did the color of the uniforms change in volume five?

Wow, someone noticed! The answer's pretty simple: the season's changed.

Butei High's female uniform has two versions, for winter and summer. The red, long-sleeved sailor uniform is used during the winter, while the blue, short-sleeved sailor uniform is worn in the summer. If there wasn't a cooler, more refreshing uniform for summer use, performance would be negatively impacted!

The flip-side is that the short-sleeved version protects less of the body with its bulletproof material, so its defensive capabilities are lowered. Accordingly, the summer uniform is actually only worn during July and August. Since they're constantly out on the battlefield, Buteis, even if hot, would rather wear the long-sleeved uniform.

But don't think for a moment this is simply because I thought to myself, "While red uniforms are great, blue would also be nice on occasion. But still, red is best!" and thus forced my preferences on Gobiuchi-sensei!

...But anyway, the deadline for submissions hasn't arrived yet! Please continue to avail yourself of the QR code on the copyright page, which will link you to our questionnaire where you can submit more questions!

Let's meet again next time in the bookstore. I wish everyone the best of health!

April 2010 - Akumatsu Chuugaku

Translator's Notes and References

- Lit. means that I translated it directly. If it is not present, it means that I made a few alterations for the sake of localization.
- Bolded words are in Mandarin.

1. ↑ 'Dogun' is the SFX for a slightly harder heartbeat, in relation to 'Doki'. 'Giku' is the SFX for a surprised heartbeat.
2. ↑ International Armed Detectives Association (Conjecture.)
3. ↑ Might be worth it to point out that "Aiya" is quite a used onomatopoeia in Chinese. Has the same connotation as "Oh my," or something along those lines. Also used as a sign of surprise.
4. ↑ Lit. Twin Snake Beheading Crush. This is an extremely strange mix of Chinese and Japanese, the 双蛇 being pronounced in something like Chinese, and the 刎頸崩 using Japanese pronunciations.
5. ↑ The Japanese word for love is, "恋", which is pronounced "こい (Koi)". Aria was spamming "こ Ko", which is also the sfx of a chicken, in the context, "ココ Koko". The missing, "い i" is what Kinji's pointing out when he says she can't say that last syllable, finishing the word.
6. ↑ フルモッフ (Furumoffu) is used here. もふもふ (MofuMofu) is the sound effect for furry, and as such, フルモッフ is literally "Full furry." This is similar slang to the フルボッコ (Furubokko) that Riko used before.
7. ↑ Hiraga-san is saying, "デキてる (Dekiteru)", which carries the connotation of getting along well, or perhaps being lovey-dovey. This turn of phrase is rather hard to explain. At any rate, Tohyama-san is saying, "できてる (Dekiteru)", which, in this case, means, "Is it finished?" However, because they are homophones, he isn't really getting the point across.
8. ↑ Jeanne says this in English. It is her catchphrase.
9. ↑ Sendra is a play on Quadra, which is an Italian word. 千 (Sen) is the Japanese word for one thousand.

10. ↑ Introvert is Kinji, and Wordless is Reki
11. ↑ Reki's name is written [レキ] as opposed to [れき], though they share the same pronunciation.
12. ↑ 彼女 (Kanojo) means both 'she' and 'girlfriend'. Kinji misunderstood her the first time she said it, though she really meant to say "she", as explained.
13. ↑ Nishijin means 'Western Front'.
14. ↑ China means "Middle Kingdom." Koko uses an old name for it.
15. ↑ The first mention of **Koko** is Cao Cao.
16. ↑ Lit. Bug Techniques
17. ↑ She says Reki's name in Kanji. Lit. Petal Princess.
18. ↑ Double entendre fully intended